NATO Response Force

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Political deftness, economic efficiency, military power

'*An intellectual equivalent of a raid*' is how a NATO staffer described US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's proposal for a rapidly deployable response force during the September 02 meeting of NATO Defense Ministers. With relatively little warning to Alliance colleagues and amidst stalling European Security Defense Proposals talks between NATO and the European Union, Mr. Rumsfeld proposed (and amazingly has sustained momentum for) establishment of a robust, NATO force capable of more than just 'flag-waving'. This force, commonly now referred to as the NATO Response Force or NRF, is intended not only to have fairly sharp teeth but also to be the vehicle that brings other Alliance forces and concepts further out of the Cold War and into the 21st century. Many involved believe that this US proposal, timed as it was just a few months before the Prague Summit, was offered to downplay the Summit's enlargement aspects (thereby not offending the Russians) and give NATO Allies one last clear chance of developing credible war-fighting capability. A kinder view holds that the NRF is a bit of an olive branch designed to allay fears of increasing US isolationism, particularly based on American exclusion of NATO during major portions of operation 'Enduring Freedom', and presents a tangible link between US, NATO and even the EU.[1] Politicians, economists, and soldiers widely accept that European Allies need to increase their military capabilities relative to their American counterpart, and the NRF may offer a deft way out by refocusing national economic efforts regarding the Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI) and serving as the catalyst for NATO's military 'transformation' efforts. Some think tank and academic work was started years ago regarding European budgets and their ability to support a rapid reaction force[2], but the most recent round of interest started with an article last autumn regarding the 'transformation' of European forces.[3] Transformation replaced revolution in military affairs (RMA) as a catch phrase and the 'spearhead NATO reaction force' promoted in the article was subsequently run through the Washington D.C. political process and came out the other end as Secretary Rumsfeld's NRF proposal.

The NRF is generally described as a powerful military force designed to stand alone for up to 30 days (or longer if reinforced and resupplied) with land, air, maritime and command elements. It is roughly intended to be comprised of a combined arms brigade including both heavy and

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[1] One view against NATO-EU harmony with respect to the NRF is described in 'The New NATO Response Force: Challenges for and Reactions from Europe,' by Ronja Kempin and found on line at the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute website: www.copri.dk/publications/Wp/WP%202002/29-2002.doc. The author even proposes that a successful NRF means the end to any meaningful ESDP.

[2] For a detailed analysis of European Defense Budgets and implications for a NATO rapid reaction force, see the 2001 Rand Corporation publication, 'European Military Prospects, Economic Constraints, and the Rapid Reaction Force,' by Charles Wolf, Jr., and Benjamin Zycher.

[3] Binnedijk, Hans, and Kugler, Richard, 'Transforming European Forces,' Survival, 44:3, Autumn 2002, pp. 117-132. Binnedijk, however, published a short piece in the February 16, 2002 edition of the International Herald Tribune in which he introduces a 'European Spearhead Force.'

50th Anniversary NATO Summit, Washington D.C., April 1999 (Foto: R.D. Ward; bron: IMG/KL)

light ground forces; it includes a composite air element capable of performing a wide range of offensive, defensive and logistic air operations; the maritime component will likely contain a carrier battle group-sized surface force as well as amphibious, air and submarine forces. More importantly to the Europeans, this force is designed to have the joint intelligence, targeting, planning and command and control capabilities that is the true discriminator between US and European militaries in the post-Cold War period.

If organized, trained and equipped properly by the nations, this joint and combined force will give NATO the punch that it previously lacked in serious crisis response and in the area where EU efforts fall short: warfighting missions. A few European defense policy highlights help one's understanding of the NRF because new NATO missions, the current operating environment, DCI, multinational formations and even the European Security Defense Identity (ESDI) are all chapters in the NRF story.

The end of history

Hardly an article, policy or study as begun in the last 13 years without 'the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union' as a lead-in to discussion on the current security environment or the end of threats as they are known today. No matter how overused the phraseology now seems, and despite the sting of September 11, the fact remains that 50 years of NATO memory have persistent influences on contemporary security structures and policies. To NATO's credit, its 1999 adaptation to these changes was fundamental, monumental and appropriate; it finally and formally recognized that its traditional threat was gone; it moved from the static/active defense concepts of the prior decades toward a strategic concept that emphasized security missions outside of NATO areas and in opposition to new threats; and it stressed the importance of developing new capabilities to meet these threats.

Furthermore, operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan have accelerated thinking that NATO's military relevancy lies, not in the ability to provide heavy land forces or tactical fighter planes in defense of NATO territory, but rather in the ability to act quickly to stabilize distant situations which, left untended, could break out into a larger conflict. Political, social and economic chaos is the new perceived enemy of 'The Western State'. This changed environment requires new tools: better intelligence, quicker force generation, greater power pro-

jection, and more precise weaponry. Perhaps the most vexing challenge is developing the command and control mechanism to pull all those tools together and put them to work.

From DCI to PCC

The NRF concept should be understood within the context of the Defense Capability Initiative's (DCI) failure to close the gap between European and US military technologies and capabilities. DCI was launched in September of 1999 during NATO's Washington Summit. DCI was, *'designed to ensure that all Allies not only remain interoperable, but that they also improve and update their capabilities to face the new security challenges'*[4] and was prompted by the example in the Kosovo skies and US-European airbases. As the air war was underway, NATO leaders realized that, despite Europe's relatively large fleet of tactical aircraft, only a few Allies had the capability of effectively integrating into US-led air operations. It was obvious; Europe lagged behind the US in military capabilities. DCI set a course to close this gap by focusing European defense acquisition efforts and budgets on five key capability shortfalls:[5]

- mobility and deployability: i.e. the ability to deploy forces quickly to where they are needed, including areas outside Alliance territory;
- sustainability; i.e. the ability to maintain and supply forces far from their home bases and to ensure that sufficient fresh forces are available for long-duration operations;
- effective engagement; i.e. the ability to successfully engage an adversary in all types of operations, from high to low intensity;
- survivability: i.e. the ability to protect forces and infrastructure against current and future threats; and
- interoperable communications: i.e. command, control and information systems which are compatible with each other, to enable forces from different countries to work effectively together.

One F-16 Fighting Falcon banks away from his wingman as they fly a Combat Air Patrol mission for NATO operation 'Allied Force'
(Foto: US Air Force; bron: IMG/KL)

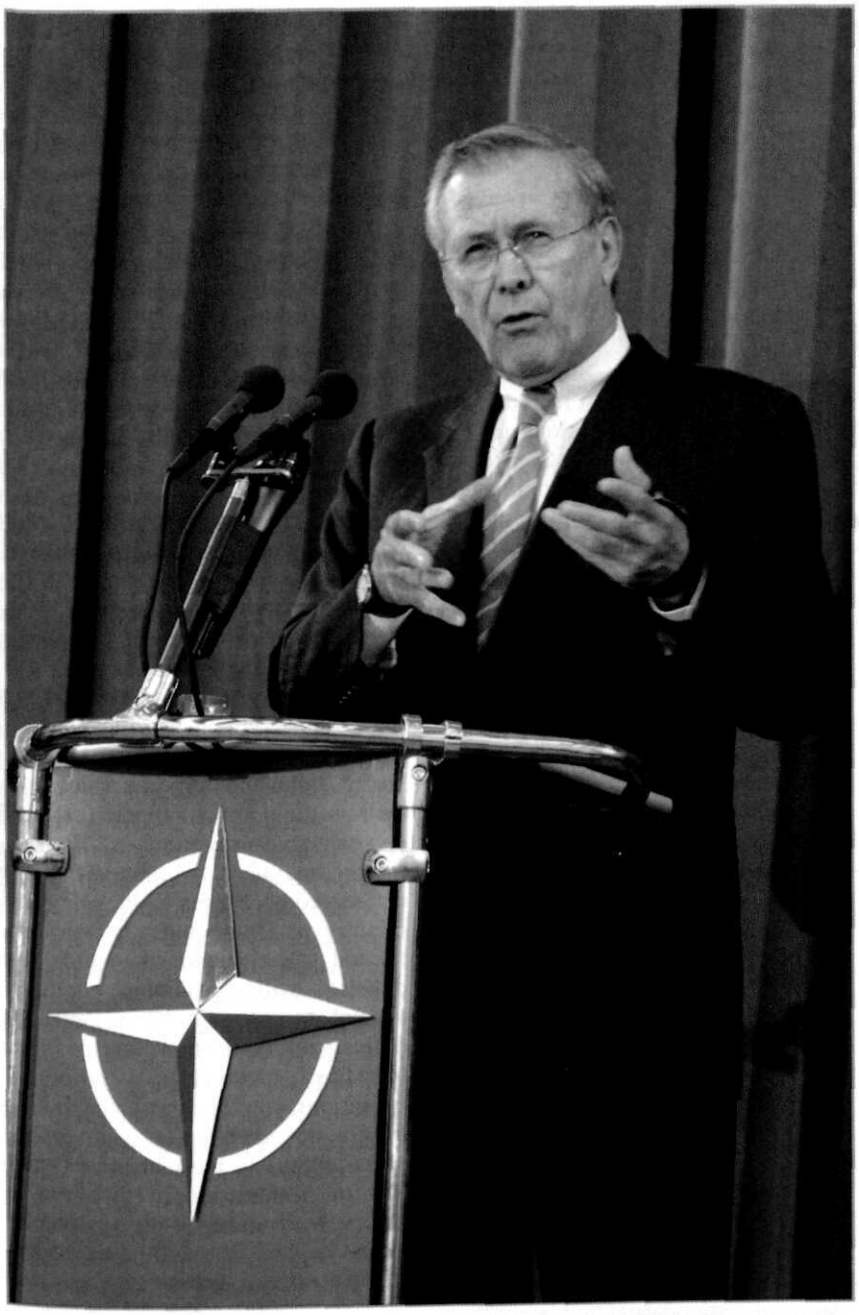
Unfortunately, Europe's political appetite was much larger than its financial stomach, and in the subsequent years, NATO's European nations made little progress. In fact, most European defense budgets declined during the intervening years.[6] To be fair, the current problem is not just lack of political will. NATO's cumbersome multi-year force planning apparatus methodically pushes nations toward formations reminiscent of the Cold War rather than focusing them on immediate capability requirements. In an effort to meet the 'old' NATO requirement (to field dozens of armored divisions of questionable utility against the 'new' threats) European budgets have little left for the expensive transition to modern militaries.

In the months leading up to the 2002 Prague Summit, it became clear that DCI was not moving as quickly as intended. Last minute efforts resulted in a number of steps to mitigate a perception of an outright failure and to repair sluggish efforts to improve capabilities. In one of these steps, DCI

[4] NATO Fact Sheet, April 2000, http://www.nato.int/docu/facts/2000/nato-dci.htm
[5] Ibid.
[6] The three year (00, 01, 02) defense expenditure trend for European NATO nations was 2.1%, 2.0%, and 2.0%, respectively. For the US during the same three year period: 3.1%, 3.1%, and 3.3%. From NATO Press Release (2002)139, available at http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2002/p02-139e.htm

was quietly retired and replaced by the Prague Capability Commitment (PCC); the name change appears to have had three general purposes: first, to start a new clock and use Prague as the initiation point; second, to keep the focus on specific capabilities; third, to emphasize 'commitment' to the Alliance.

It is into this circumstance that the US proposed the NATO Response Force. As the 'catalyst for the transformation of Alliance capabilities' the NRF replaced enlargement at center stage at the Prague summit and was wholeheartedly endorsed by Heads of State. The concept, as it is now taking shape inside NATO, has nations contributing formations to the NRF and envisions those units as the recipients of national 'high-tech' reform. Once units receive these upgrades, they are rotated through the highest NRF readiness window and then eventually spread their experience and institutional knowledge back throughout their national forces and ultimately into an Alliance-wide military culture of modernity.



Press Conference by US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, September 2002 (Foto: NATO; bron: IMG/KL)

Missions

Both EU and NATO language has focused heavily on a buzzword, 'capability'. Before putting the capabilities-cart in front of the mission-horse, however, a question needs answering: what load is the NRF being asked to carry? On one hand, it would be nice to have a modernized but conventional force capable of working with US units at high levels of interoperability. Outfitting combat aircraft with Link-16 communication equipment and precision-guided munitions (PGM), purchasing strategic lift assets, or simply upgrading the existing logistic units would all further the PCC goals, ESDI objectives, and help make the NRF a reality. On the other hand, having NATO forces ready to meet *future* challenges would be extremely useful to the US. Creating, for example, NATO unmanned aerial vehicle, missile defense, nuclear-biological-chemical (NBC) detection and decontamination or even computer network attack/defense units would not only help lighten the US load in these areas, but would also indicate NATO sincerity in meeting new threats. NATO planners are acutely aware that political leaders will look to the NRF as a one-size-fits-all force and demand from it more than is reasonable. Because of this concern, military advice seems cautious. NRF missions could include 'traditional' military missions like deploying air, maritime or ground forces as a show of force, serving as an initial entry force of an even larger force, and conducting stand-alone, appropriately-sized offensive or defensive joint operations.[7]

Crisis response missions like non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) or humanitarian assistance/disaster relief are also expected. But giving the NRF 'new' missions like theater missile defence and 'consequence management' (including response to a weapon of mass destruction event or possibly pre-emption) are hot topics and discussing the issue of 'pre-emptive' strikes within the NRF context even more heated. Before determining the NRF's capabilities and structures, NATO's military leaders must consider various planning situations and missions before providing advice to its political masters.

Structure

Fortunately, America's geo-strategic position over the last century has given it a rich experience with expeditionary warfare, rotational systems and graduated readiness. Consequently, there should be data available to Allies that shows, for example, optimal rotation lengths and readiness windows as well as useful organization and structures. Unfortunately, this experience and data may not be applicable to NATO's collective understanding of an NRF concept. Differing ideas about NRF missions and structures are the crux of the current problem. National considerations based on recruitment, training, assignments, structures and most importantly budgets, will require the US proposal to be adjusted.

The structures needed to support an NRF concept, for example, may grow beyond that originally envisioned by the US. Is there one NRF or two? Or three? Or is a new one generated for every rotation, *ad infinitum*. One NRF could likely be created in a matter of days just by having nations come together to conduct a force generation conference as is normally done for operations. But to achieve the desired level of readiness and the lethality (and then maintain them indefinitely) NATO nations require enough forces and headquarters to maintain one NRF ready to go within days, one NRF being trained and certified, and quite possibly another NRF either being generated from forces not included in either of the first two 'rotations' (or in a recovery or refit cycle). Considering that each rotation is approximated at 20,000 people, the complete package could result in an EU Headline Goal-like figure of 60,000 people. Given that the US itself does not yet have a synchronized joint rotational system or standing joint task force headquarters,[8] it might be too much to expect NATO's nations to collectively plan, train, equip, operate and command an effective NRF.

The NRF's air component will provide a rapid deployment capability, as part of a joint and combined force, to conduct the full range of air tasks using advanced air-to-air and precision guided air-to-surface munitions. The C2-system should be able to control several hundred sorties per day and conduct the functions of air defense, air reconnaissance, close air support, air interdiction, combat search and rescue, target acquisition, airborne early warning, tactical airlift. In addition, the air component should have air to air refueling capability[9] and some nations even promote its possession of dedicated strategic airlift necessary to deploy, sustain and redeploy the NRF.[10] Getting NATO's European Allies to modernize their 4,500 combat aircraft (a number larger than that of the United States) so all of them (not the current 10% figure) are all-weather capable and fitted with PGMs will be a crucial step forward for the NRF.

The land component for the NRF will contain a structure sufficient to allow the deployment of an appropriately tailored brigade-size formation, with support assets to allow it to operate over the full range of land tasks and terrain. The tricky part of establishing this ground component will be having it contain an appropriate mix of heavy, light and airborne forces, as well as the combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS). Perhaps interesting to US planners, NATO defines combat arms to include only infantry or armor units. It considers CS and CSS elements to include, air defense, artillery, aviation, engineer, special forces as well as military police, communication, NBC defense, logistics, medical, psychological operations, civil military, and public affairs personnel/units. Convincing NATO nations to reorient their forces toward lighter, more deployable forces with some of these specific CS/CSS capabilities, will be an important part of NRF success.

The NRF maritime component is simultaneously the poster child for

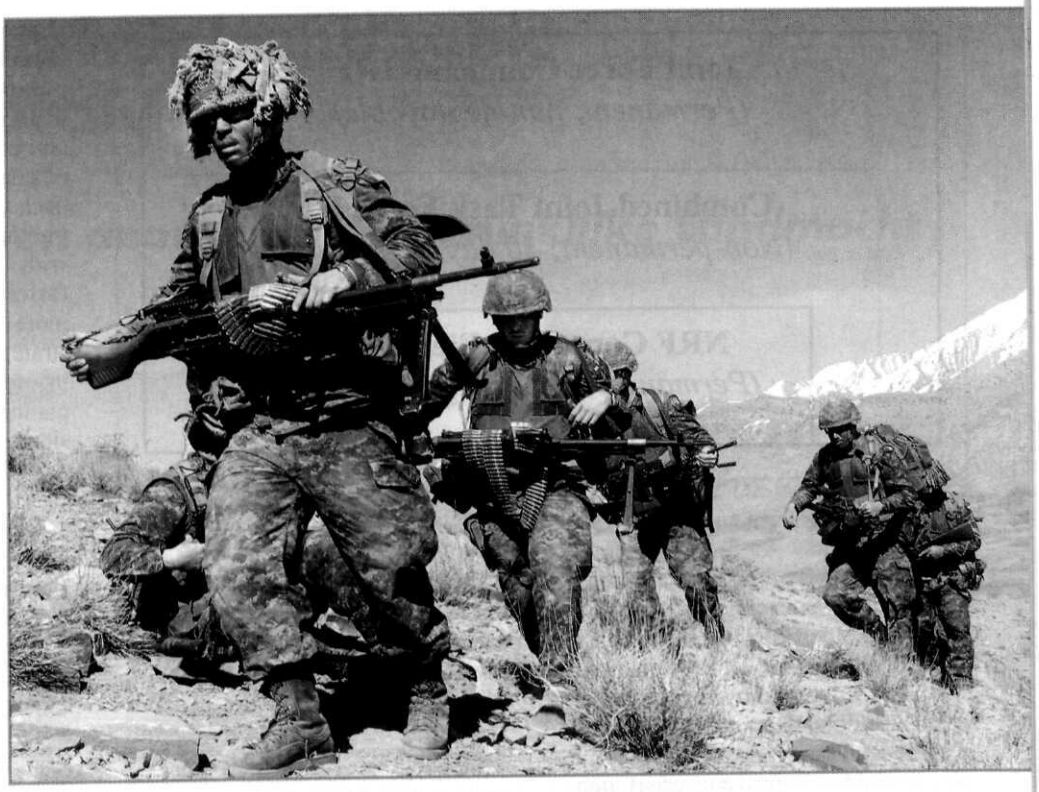
[7] One point of debate appears to be the Allies' reluctance to give this NRF a forced entry mission. Some nations consider that a force of such limited size would not be capable of conducting forcible entry against stiff opposition. This issue is a matter of perspective: allied forced entry into Normandy on 6 Jun 1944 required more than NRF-envisioned 20,000 people; 'forced entry' into Panama, Grenada, and Somalia required forces near that magnitude.

[8] Each service has its rotational system for rapid response: army brigades rotate through as the DRB (Division Ready Brigade), the Marines rotate their Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU) and most recently the Air Force joined in with their Air Expeditionary Force (AEF) concept. Those forces often have some regional focus and frequently exercise with sister-services under the unified/combatant commands, but there is not a coherent national plan to rotate forces through the same readiness windows and under a specific commander on a habitual basis. US Joint Forces Command tested the Standing Joint Force HQ model during Millennium Challenge 02 and each combatant commander is exploring their own options or adaptations. But the regular use of a SJFHQ is years off.

[9] Air-to-air refueling missions are organized and executed in different ways within the US services; it's not clear what the US envisions for NATO in this regard.

[10] The US centrally manages strategic lift assets and does not release this authority down to the tactical level. It is unclear at which level an NRF commander would 'own' strategic lift assets. This capability may be another 'bridge too far' with respect to NRF capabilities.

NATO interoperability and host to the largest capability gap. This maritime component consists of a force of up to a NATO task force size including a carrier battle group with associated surface and subsurface combatant units, amphibious forces, and naval mine countermeasure units and support vessels. Such a force should be able to conduct the full range of maritime tasks, including interdiction, air defense, amphibious operations, freedom[11] of navigation, anti-submarine warfare, naval mine countermeasure warfare, naval air strike missions and necessary dedicated strategic sea lift.[12] Determining the new relations with NATO's most successful multinational and interoperable formations, like the Standing Naval Forces Atlantic and Mediterranean will help make the NRF a reality but creation of more carrier battle groups is a significant challenge to European budgets.



Canadian Light Infantry in Shah-i-Kot Valley, Afghanistan, March 2002
(Foto: cpl Lou Penney; bron: IMG/KL)

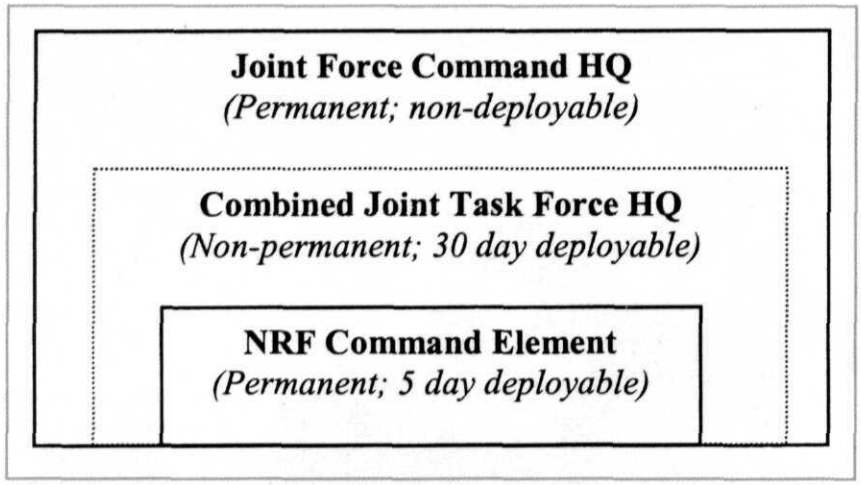
Perhaps the principle controversy is the understanding of the 'concreteness' of the NRF. Is it a real 'unit' that comes into existence (or three units that come on and off cycle) or is it a consortium of loosely coordinated forces that simultaneously rotating through readiness windows? The best solution is also the most costly. Ideally, NATO could create three equal force packages that rotate through the calendar four months at a time. This simple cycle would also rely on identification of a small pool of specific low density/high demand capabilities that may be 'permanently' on call. Rotation of forces will be required if the NRF is to be sustained. That same logic, however, may not apply to an NRF command element.

Command and control

As in every situation involving NATO, command becomes the focus of both political and military attention and sometimes disagreement. French dissatisfaction over the continued American pre-eminence of NATO commands, for example, sidelined French reintegration into the integrated military structure in the late 1990s. The NRF has found itself in the middle of the discussion over the reconfiguring of the NATO command structure.

Although there are many issues to be resolved, participants tend to agree that the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) is the primary tool to command and control (C2) the NRF. The NATO CJTF, modeled on the US JTF-concept, has been under discussion and development in since 1994 and has evolved toward either a static Joint Force Command HQ generating a deployable CJTF HQ or using a sea-based CJTF HQ capability.[13] Today's CJTF-NRF debate centers on the nature of the relationship between the JFC HQ, CJTF HQ and the NRF, the number and type of CJTF HQs required to command the NRF, the CJTF HQ status in peacetime, and whether they will operate from land or sea-based headquarters. The NRF injects additional variables into the discussion because of its very short deployment timeline (5 days for advanced elements-which exceed the 30 day CJTF-timeline). The command element for the NRF will most likely require a standing structure with dedicated staffing in order to meet the 5 day crisis response timeline. The table shows a possible configuration for NRF command and control structure and the associated deployability timeline for each HQ or command element. Any of the three HQ or element listed could command the NRF but

[11] One issue that needs further work is the level of capability envisioned: amphibious landing is widely accepted though amphibious assaults (forced entry) are more debated.
[12] See footnote 6 .



NRF C2 Configuration

will be driven by the specific mission parameters.

Linked to this short deployment timeline, is the need for a coordinated political/military approach to crisis response. Though NATO has continually worked to improve its crisis management procedures, having a force capable of moving so quickly may outstrip lengthy political debates and cumbersome parliamentary approval procedures.

[13] e.g. the current Allied Forces South (AFSOUTH) or AFNORTH. Commander, Striking Fleet Atlantic (CSFL) is currently the basis of the sea-based CJTF HQ and relies on the US Second Fleet.

Informal meeting of NATO Defense ministers, September 2002
(Foto: NATO; bron: IMG/KL)

Historically, NATO's strength has always been its consensus; the unanimity of member nations signal determination to protect individual and collective interests. This strength of consensus is not without its drawbacks, principle among them speed of political decision making. The NRF, with its limited military aims but faster response time, will require more authority and resources for the strategic and operational commanders in order to conduct prudent military planning in advance of political decisions.

Will it work?

The answer to the 'will it work' is a resounding 'maybe'. National willpower is the driver and when all 19 (soon to be 26) nations are united in cause, then they are able accomplish even the most challenging tasks. The key challenge for NATO over the past decade has been reinventing its structures, capabilities, and decision making processes, so that it can meet the security needs of its member states and the wider Euro-Atlantic region.

This challenge persists today and sits constantly on the horizon. The Cold War mechanisms which produced multiple corps of land heavy forces and ensured political consensus, have proved resilient to change. Initiatives to revitalize and restructure the Alliance toward a more responsive and deployable military force are consistently dulled. With the failure of DCI, many observers look to the NATO Response Force as a 'last chance' for NATO to transform itself into the relevant organization that keeps both sides of the Atlantic interested in the Alliance. Its success or failure will be determined by the nations who ultimately provide not only the funding for such a force, but also the sons and daughters.