ENABLING NATO RESPONSIVENESS THROUGH FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT
The road march, a.k.a. "Dragoon Ride": As part of Operation Atlantic Resolve, the 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment spent months living and training alongside Allied forces in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. This road march traversed more than 1,800 kilometers, crossed five Allied borders, and included the participation of each nation’s armed forces as the convoys travelled across each country. PHOTO: SGT 1st Class JOHN WOLLASTON, U.S. ARMY

AS NATO APPROACHES THE WARSAW SUMMIT, the most prominent initiative of the 2014 Wales Summit—the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF)—is established, certified and ready. The land component of this "Spearhead Force" is a robust multi-national brigade-sized unit comprised of over 5,000 soldiers and hundreds of vehicles, which stays at a high state of readiness and can start deploying its forces in as little as 48-hours. This heightened level of readiness is a new and important aspect of the NATO Response Force (NRF) and will enable the Alliance to respond quickly in times of crisis.
"We will significantly enhance the responsiveness of our NATO Response Force (NRF) by developing force packages that are able to move rapidly and respond to potential challenges and threats. As part of it, we will establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), a new Allied joint force that will be able to deploy within a few days to respond to challenges that arise, particularly at the periphery of NATO’s territory."
— Wales Summit Declaration, 5 September 2014

**Speed of Assembly**

The VJTF marks a significant achievement for the Alliance. In June 2015, just four months after deciding upon the composition of the VJTF, NATO successfully exercised an interim VJTF made up of Czech and Dutch paratroopers, German and Norwegian infantry, Polish and Lithuanian Special Forces, Belgian artillery, U.S. helicopters and a Hungarian Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC) unit during Exercise NOBLE JUMP in Poland.

In October 2015, during exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE, NATO certified the functions of the new Spanish-led Spearhead Force for 2016. The development and enhancement process of the VJTF concept continues throughout 2016 with further exercises, such as BRILLIANT JUMP, TRIDENT JOUST and BRILLIANT CAPABILITY. During the Foreign Ministers meeting at NATO Headquarters on 8 October 2015, the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that "We now have everything in place to make the Response Force stronger, faster and more capable."1

Despite these significant advancements in readiness, there is still more work to be done to make the VJTF as well as other NRF and NATO forces faster and more responsive. Readiness to deploy is one component of responsiveness and has recently been the main emphasis of NATO’s efforts. The speed at which we move the force across land is the other equally important component. I call this the “Speed of Assembly” and it is simply how fast we can move soldiers and equipment from many nations, by road or rail, to the location where they are needed. This is not an easy task considering the size and weight of military equipment such as a main battle tank, the geography of Europe, and the multiple border crossings. There are many barriers to rapid movement that must be systematically reduced to allow for Freedom of Movement (FoM) across Europe. Preparations must be made in advance to ensure that the infrastructure, transport, and, most importantly, plans and processes are in place to enable a rapid deployment of forces throughout Europe, for either exercise or crisis response.

**The Challenges**

The size of military equipment itself is a challenge. An American Abrams main battle tank weighs nearly 67 metric tons while the British Challenger 2 and the German Leopard 2 weigh approximately 62 metric tons. There are only a small number of military and commercial means for moving tanks and equally heavy armored recovery vehicles. These vehicles are mostly moved by rail with limited use of Heavy Equipment Transport from railheads to training areas. Both width and weight of vehicles might exceed allowable limits. Therefore, all routes which are to be used for movement of armored vehicles must be checked to ensure that the bridges and tunnels can support these moves. This is especially important for movements in NATO’s easternmost countries.

Within NATO, there is already a concerted effort to improve the FoM and, therefore, responsiveness of the VJTF. In April 2015, NATO Headquarters stood up the "Ad Hoc Working Group for Multi-Modal Strategic Transportation". This working group is chaired by the United States, and has national participation from Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Its objectives are twofold:

1. Review current national multi-modal strategic transportation arrangements with the purpose of evaluating their sufficiency to support the deployment and sustainment requirements associated with the Readiness Action Plan (RAP);
2. Conduct an analysis to develop recommendations to mitigate and limit any identified risk(s).

So far, the Ad Hoc Working Group has surveyed the existing documents regarding border crossings, conducted a gap analysis of NATO and national publications and created a repository of the documents and regulations. Additionally, it began development of a Joint Operational Guidance (JOG) to facilitate the pre-clearance process for VJTF framework and sending nations. The JOG will lay the groundwork for rapid processing for VJTF movements along pre-established routes. These procedures should be used for training as well as in time of crisis, so that we “train as we fight.”

Rapid deployment of the VJTF will be facilitated by small Command and Control nodes called the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIUs). The NFIUs are working in conjunction with selected Host Nations to identify logistical networks, transportation nodes and supporting infrastructure in order to ensure that NATO high readiness forces can deploy to an assigned region as quickly as possible, within two to seven days.

The NFIUs were first established in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania during 2015, and will be staffed on a rotational basis. Subsequently, two more NFIUs will be established in Slovakia and Hungary in 2016 and 2017, respectively.

In concert with the NATO Headquarters’ effort, the U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) is working bi-laterally with its NATO Allies to improve the FoM. USAREUR engineers and military police are assessing routes, which are used to move USAREUR forces into training areas across the eastern flank for Atlantic Resolve. As part of the "European Reassurance Initiative", USAREUR engineers are improving infrastructure, to include railheads and access roads to training areas. Working bi-laterally, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland and France reduced their diplomatic clearance timelines for the U.S. forces moving across their borders. This is helping to facilitate more realistic readiness exercises for the USAREUR units. This series of exercises, called 'Freedom Shock Training Events', are no notice alerts for units to deploy from their home station to a training area to conduct specified tasks and training. To date, USAREUR has conducted Freedom Shock events with armored, airborne, air defense, medical, and logistics units. To exercise FoM, USAREUR units conduct rail or road movements to their destinations. For normal training events USAREUR units regularly drive their wheeled vehicles, including the Stryker armored vehicles, to their home stations in Germany and Italy from training areas as far away as Estonia and Bulgaria.

Going Forward

To realize the full potential of the Spearhead Force, the work on FoM must proceed and accelerate. The need for ground movement corridors, standard diplomatic clearance timelines, and improved transportation infrastructure nodes applies to all regions of Europe and not just the eastern and southern periphery. After all, at some point, forces from all 28 NATO Nations will need to move and assemble for the purposes of either training or crisis response. Therefore, all Alliance Members must make these FoM objectives a priority. Speed is what will make the VJTF successful; FoM is what enables speed.

1 Jens Stoltenberg, “NATO Defence Ministers take further steps to enhance Collective Defence,” NATO News, 8 October 2015.