

Anthony Tucker-Jones reports on a reinvigorated alliance forced to confront Russian expansionism and Islamic militants

President Obama came away from September's Nato Summit in Wales saying, "I leave here confident that Nato allies and partners are prepared to join in a broad, international effort to combat the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS)." In contrast, Prime Minister Cameron struck a more cautionary note. "We will proceed carefully and methodically," he said. Within weeks, the US had stepped up its airstrikes in Iraq and launched its very first raids into Syria.

The Nato summit finally showed that the alliance had come of age. Its members have rediscovered enemies of old who are up to their old tricks and found a new forte conducting counter-insurgency operations. With the old certainties of the Cold War long gone, Nato recognises that it has to modernise and that it now faces challenges posed by what it calls "hybrid warfare threats".

At the top of Nato's agenda were the vexed issues of Russia, Ukraine, Iraq and Syria. To combat further Russian expansionism, the allies adopted a Readiness Action Plan which included setting up a Readiness Joint Task Force that can forward deploy within days. The Allies also agreed to halt the decline in their defence budgets and ensure they amount to two per cent of GDP within a decade. Likewise, the allies undertook to increase the capabilities of HQ Multinational Corps Northeast based in Poland. Just to hammer home the message, Nato will conduct Exercise Black Eagle in Poland later this year. These measures were clearly intended as a warning shot across Russia's bows following the annexation of Crimea.

Since the end of the Cold War, Nato has tried to reinvent itself and find a new rationale for its existence. Once Eastern Europe had come in from the cold and a rapprochement was reached with Russia, there seemed little reason for Nato to maintain its armed standoff with Moscow. The growing assertiveness of the European Union and Brussels' desire to duplicate Nato's military capabilities also, for a time, seemed to indicate a growing redundancy for Nato.

In recent months, the alliance's disparate members have struggled to come up with coherent strategies for dealing with a resurgent Russia and militant Islam – whereas in the past a show of force ensured détente, now it inevitably needs overt military action. But the alliance's great strength is that it ensures American military muscle is included in Europe's insurance plan – the EU, being a rival trading bloc, does not.

Ironically, by reinventing itself, Nato has become a victim of its own success and inadvertently created a new Cold War. Since 1949 the number of member countries has more than doubled and Nato has cut its operational teeth with frontline missions in the Balkans (which almost brought the alliance to blows with Russia over Serbia and Kosovo), Iraq and Afghanistan. Less than decade after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – all former Soviet satellite Warsaw Pact allies – were embraced into the Nato fold. Ukraine did not step over the threshold, but the 1997

NATO

Nato-Ukraine Commission ensured that Kiev began to look increasingly west, culminating in aspirations to join the EU.

While some Russians may have felt this was ingratitude on the part of their Slavic Ukrainian cousins, Moscow had better things to worry about at the time. Russia's economy was in free fall and the Russian military became embroiled in a series of costly small wars across the Russian Federation. Then, in 2004, to add insult to injury the former Soviet Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined Nato along with former Warsaw Pact members Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia as well as Slovenia. The security cordon that Moscow had thrown around itself to guard against future German



REBOOTED

aggression was gone and now seemed to be working in reverse.


Perhaps predictably, in 2007 Russia refused to observe the troop ceilings imposed by the Conventional Forces Europe Treaty. The limits on the Warsaw Pact allies were now meaningless and Russia refused to withdraw its troops from Georgia or Moldova. Meanwhile, Nato's missile defence system began to creep eastwards with radars and missiles deployed to the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania. Under these circumstances Moscow began to see Nato as a growing threat rather than a stabilising force that ensured a balance of power in Europe.

Nato-Russia relations finally completely soured in 2008 when Nato intimated that Georgia would be welcome as an ally. Moscow's response was to swiftly intervene in Georgia, which was


struggling to contain separatists. Then, in early 2014, Moscow moved to curtail Nato's expansion across the Black sea by seizing the Crimea from Ukraine – this ensured Nato warships would never be welcome in the naval base at Sevastopol.

Nato holds Russia in breach of commitments under the 1997 Nato-Russia Founding Act and the 2002 Rome Declaration. The view is that Russia has persistently violated the sovereignty of its neighbours, culminating in its less-than-covert support for pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists and the Crimean land grab. Moscow strenuously denies it has armed the pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists or shelled Ukrainian soil from Russia. There is, however, clear evidence to the contrary, culminating in the presence of elements of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division fighting alongside the separatists. Few see the security buffer created by the Minsk Memorandum as little more than window dressing. Kiev granting eastern Ukraine self rule may yet see the region vote to join Russia.

In contrast, Nato takes a holier-than-thou attitude by claiming the emphasis upon the rotation of troops



March of success: Nato-trained Afghan security forces will be responsible for securing the alliance's legacy after 2014



NATO REBOOTED

rather than the permanent basing in eastern and central Europe is designed to avoid contravening the Founding Act. The significance of Nato agreeing to pre-position equipment and supplies in the former Warsaw Pact states will not be lost on Russia, though.

The Wales summit continued to goad Moscow by reaffirming the commitment to the Nato-Ukraine Commission. Similarly Russia will be less than impressed by the Joint Expeditionary Force Agreement. The UK has signed this along with Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway, with the aim of having the JEF operational by 2018. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said, "This will be developed around the UK's existing high-readiness units, and will provide a capability that can respond anywhere in the world, in any environment, as part of a coalition, or on behalf of international organisations such as the UN and Nato." The composition of this force can leave Moscow with little illusion about where it might be committed. The presence of RAF Typhoons patrolling Baltic airspace further signals Russian meddling will not be tolerated.

Equally pressing is the question of how to conduct a coherent strategy against the Islamic militants of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and how to help Afghanistan after Nato's disengagement at the end of the year. Notably, Washington held back from launching its offensive air campaign to "degrade" the capabilities of ISIS in Iraq until mid-September – well after the summit. Throughout August, the only operations carried out had been "defensive" in nature. Likewise, the US did not begin targeting ISIS bases in Syria until late September.

What commitments US President Barak Obama elicited from Prime Minister David Cameron remains unclear. The suggestion by former Prime Minister Tony Blair that there will be a need to provide boots on the ground to properly combat ISIS is likely to fall on deaf ears within the alliance. Obama is no doubt hoping that an Operation Enduring Freedom-type mission – with air strikes and Special Forces assisting local forces in Iraq – will succeed in driving back ISIS as it did with the Taliban in Afghanistan. This approach has now been extended to Syria.

In Afghanistan, Nato will have its work cut out propping up the Afghan National Police after the 2014 withdrawal. These forces are key to maintaining security in Afghanistan's cities. While the Afghan National Security Forces total around 350,000, nearly half this consists of the lightly-armed ANP. Nato needs to prioritise assistance to them in the urban areas, while the Afghan army tries to keep the Taliban from operating from their bases in neighbouring Pakistan.

In support of these efforts, the Nato-Afghanistan Status of Forces and US-Afghanistan Bilateral Security agreements were finally signed at the end of September, which ensures the alliance will keep a residual presence in the country. Outgoing President Hamid Karzai refused to do this and hamstrung the ANSF by refusing to allow them to seek Nato air support for fear of further civilian casualties. These



new deals struck with Ashraf Ghani, the newly elected Afghan president, will permit a 12,000 strong Nato-led mission to train and assist the ANSF for another two years.

At the end of the Wales summit, outgoing Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen optimistically declared, "We have made Nato fitter, faster and more flexible. We have brought our partners even closer. And we have made the vital bond across the Atlantic stronger." With the US air strikes against militants in Iraq and Syria already underway, this implied that what Washington wants, Washington gets. Arguably, Nato has stirred up a hornet's nest by backing the air attacks which inevitably will lead to retaliation in Western capitals.

Regarding Ukraine, the Joint Statement of the Nato-Ukraine Commission claimed: "Nato and Ukraine will continue to promote the development of a greater interoperability between Ukrainian and Nato forces, including through continued regular Ukrainian participation in Nato exercises." This will be reassuring to the Ukrainian government desperate to reassert its authority over eastern Ukraine in the wake of a conflict that has left almost three thousand people dead and displaced a million.

The Russian government's response was predictable, stating Nato's stance "will inevitably lead to heightened tension". Moscow has already signalled through its actions in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine that it will not tolerate Ukraine joining Nato. After the fall of the Soviet Union, British intelligence warned Whitehall that it would take a decade for a resurgence of Russian military might; a quarter of a century on it seems no one heeded that warning and that Nato took its eye off the proverbial ball. One can only hope that the Russian bear goes back to sleep; if not, this constant muscle flexing will only ramp up the tensions even further.

US president Barack Obama used the Nato summit in Wales to build a coalition against ISIS

Anthony Tucker-Jones is intersec's terrorism and security correspondent. He is a former defence intelligence officer and is now a widely published defence commentator specialising in regional conflicts and counter terrorism.