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Lift the tollgates: Europe needs greater cross-border military mobility

European militaries, including Finland's, increasingly train, carry out exercises, and deploy together across the continent under EU, NATO, or national auspices, often with American and Canadian units. Speed of manoeuvre can be critical for deterrence and defence, so cross-border procedures for military transport and troops must be simplified and standardized, while respecting national sovereignty.

"Amateurs talk strategy, but professionals talk logistics," according to the military adage. Hence, when Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, the US army commander in Europe, discusses US, allied, and partner efforts to strengthen their deterrence and defence posture following the 2014 Russian intervention in Ukraine, he never fails to mention one of his biggest headaches: the multiple physical and administrative bottlenecks that can slow the military's movements.

US forces are not the only ones concerned. EU member states, for example, must move hardware and soldiers across borders to train their rapid response "battlegroups". Sweden's recent Aurora 17 exercise – its largest territorial defence drill in decades – included units from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Lithuania, Norway and the US.

Instances of the problem abound. When Hodges sought to move armoured and other heavy vehicles to and from the Baltic states or Romania, his forces discovered bridges and roadways unable to support their weight. Upgrading those routes and addressing other infrastructure gaps – which involve, for example, NATO's guaranteed access to sufficient rail cars and fuel pipelines and storage facilities – will take time and money.

More frustrating, perhaps, are the many different legal and procedural hurdles that American, European, and Canadian commanders have confronted when crossing borders. In a recent interview, Hodges complained that his units have to "submit a list of all the vehicles, the drivers, what's in every truck" – time-consuming procedures that are not normally applied to large commercial carriers. His convoys, he added, sometimes wait for weeks for permission to move through certain countries. (Each German Land has its own requirements.) And when troop movements are involved, rank does not always have its privileges: during an exercise last summer, Hodges' military flight from Bulgaria to a Romanian training site was diverted so that Romanian authorities could stamp his passport.

This may sound like a trivial problem, but it is not. As demonstrated in their recent large-scale Zapad drills and multiple "snap" exercises, Russian forces are modernizing and practising their capabilities to deploy rapidly and impede NATO's ability to come to the aid of a threatened ally or partner. During Zapad, for example, it is doubtful that Russian units were delayed by Belarussian border checks.

In principle, NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (a land brigade of about 5,000 troops, plus air and maritime support) should be able to deploy within very few days, with up to 40,000 troops in the full NATO Response Force able to follow shortly thereafter. But if delayed at border crossings, their longer response time would equate to a lesser deterrent and, if deterrence fails, to a weaker defence.

This explains why Hodges' desire to improve cross-border military mobility has been gaining traction in both NATO and the EU. To his credit, Hodges no longer refers to the need for a "military Schengen", having recognized that such terminology is inappropriate. (Only 22 allies are EU members, and not all EU members are in the Schengen zone.) And to their credit, a half-dozen nations, including Finland, have proposed an initiative within the EU's "Permanent Structured Cooperation" context to simplify and standardize cross-border military transport procedures that would apply to militaries operating in a NATO context as well.

This makes sense, and builds on solid precedents. Under EU auspices, centres that coordinate European military transportation resources and movements have agreed on a single

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procedure for diplomatic clearances. Since its summits in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016), NATO has been chipping away at the larger problem of parliamentary regulations on troop transits; in some cases, pre-notification requirements dropped from 30 days to a few hours.

Such efforts, especially if well-coordinated between NATO and the EU, will benefit partners like Finland and Sweden, which have stepped up their cooperation with each other, with the United States, with other regional partners (like Norway), and with the Alliance writ large. Other synergies could address the infrastructure challenges, perhaps by coordinating NATO investment projects with those eligible for EU structural funds.

To be clear, improving cross-border military mobility does not imply that EU member states (or allies) would surrender their sovereign right to decide whether and, if so, how to participate in a given exercise or military operation. Nor would it mean that participating nations would be obliged to drop sensible safety regulations, for example, on the shipment of hazardous materials. Military authorities and national transportation and safety authorities would no doubt need to meet each other halfway.

Still, European governments and citizens live in a security environment where speed of military manoeuvre can help deter risk-taking or aggression by others. And the military's rapid response capability needs to be exercised to be credible. Hence, cutting red tape and lifting real and virtual tollgates should not be too much to ask for.