

Comparing Conventional Capabilities in Northern Europe

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Abstract

The decline of Putin's Russia into a more militarised state with an aggressive and revisionist foreign policy has prompted politicians, scholars, and soldiers to discuss whether there is a risk of Russian "hybrid war" or overt military strike against e.g. one of the three Baltic states. Two opposing views are apparent. Some note that NATO's combined economies and military capabilities dwarf Russia's by a factor of about twenty to one, and conclude that Russia thus is no threat at all to any part of NATO. Others, including hyper-nationalist Russian strategists, suggest that the balance of forces in Northern Europe favours Russia, and that Putin consider or should consider a strike against e.g. the Baltic states. The conflict between the two views of NATO's conventional capabilities and deterrence in Northern Europe has inspired this contribution, which updates Cold War era methods for assessing the military balance, and seeks a pattern in the findings.

When estimating military capabilities the mere accounting of numbers of personnel and main equipment says very little. A military capability requires not only the merging of workable materiel with trained personnel but also with relevant command structures and a logistical framework. Furthermore, the depth of the logistical framework, which includes stores and spares, a supply chain, and fieldable maintenance and repair facilities is both essential and very difficult to assess. The same can be said for the training level of the capabilities and their overarching commands and underlying logistics; and in cases where the capability is expected to be expeditionary its ability to deploy it must be factored in.

During the Cold War the comparison of Soviet and NATO conventional strength was a key issue to which much discussion was devoted, but the assessments were largely

done inside narrow circles of soldiers or scholars with privileged access to intelligence. While the interest in the estimation of *Mechanised Division Equivalents* waned after the Cold War, earlier insights and methods are still available and can be used for similar pursuits today (see e.g. *International Security* vol. 12:4, 1988). Moreover, a significant change in public access to military estimates has recently occurred. The Internet now provides access to satellite imagery and searchable official and unofficial defence related databases, sites and discussions, which supplement commercial and academic resources such as *Jane's* and *The Military Balance*. With a great many stipulations and a change from divisions to brigades as accounting unit *Mechanised Brigade Equivalents* can thus be estimated country by country in Northern Europe (here the countries around the Baltic Sea plus Norway).

Having done this it is found, firstly, that NATO indeed has a significant local disadvantage in Northern Europe. Even when its forces are combined Russian conventional capabilities are at the very least twice as large in the short to medium run. The disadvantage is markedly larger if the Northern European NATO countries' logistical shortcomings, lack of collective training, and potential inability to move its forces into e.g. the Baltic states are factored in. Secondly, the apparent ability of several Northern European states such as Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to convert their defence spending into military capabilities differ by more than an order of magnitude in relation to Russia and in particular to Finland. Thirdly, even though the marked variations in force generation effectiveness are not explained by a single factor it seems that armed forces manning model explains much of the difference. The deficiencies of some manning models may be caused by flaws in national defence policy processes, possibly coupled with wide-spread perceptions of the armed forces and of military professionalism which unintentionally reduces military efficiency.

That there are vast distances between nominal personnel and materiel numbers and real capabilities in some countries is not a recent discovery. The 2004 report "A European Defence Strategy" by Julian Lindley-French and Franco Algieri noted that "there are 1.7 million Europeans in uniform, but only 170,000 combat soldiers, of which only 40-50,000 can be used for robust combat operations at any one time". The report suggested that this was caused by "an ever increasing operational tempo" coupled with "static or falling personnel numbers and defence budgets" and not the least that the ineffective forces were "conscript-based and ... committed to territorial defence". In February 2015 report with a similar scope, "More Union in European Defence" from the Centre for European Policy Studies, suggested that European NATO's lack of operational capabilities were caused by a lack of funding as well as "huge inefficiencies, due to duplication of capacities, platforms and systems...". Which of the suggested causes, namely *cuts*, *conscription*, *territorial defence*, or *duplication* are really behind the variance in the aforementioned Northern European states' ability to generate military capabilities consonant with their defence budgets?

Preliminary analyses indicate that some armed forces do not have the right number of soldiers of the right age, rank, and training, but generally employ far too many full-time personnel and maintain militarily ineffective rank and age cohorts. Thus inappropriate manning models have led to excessive personnel costs, which have reduced procurement, training, maintenance, education, and deployment for decades. This to the point where even nominally very large and well-funded armed forces have become practically unable to generate and deploy military capabilities beyond symbolic contributions.

Further research into this interpretation of the majority of the Northern European states' relative inability to generate military forces for both conventional or expeditionary use will be required to confirm the underlying causes, and allow for the correction of the problems.