BREAKING THE DUAL SPIRAL OF DIMINISHING CAPABILITIES

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List of abbreviations

C4ISTAR – Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Surveillance, Target Acquisitioning and Reconnaissance
MENA – Middle East and North Africa
NFIU – NATO Force Integration Unit
R&D – Research and Development

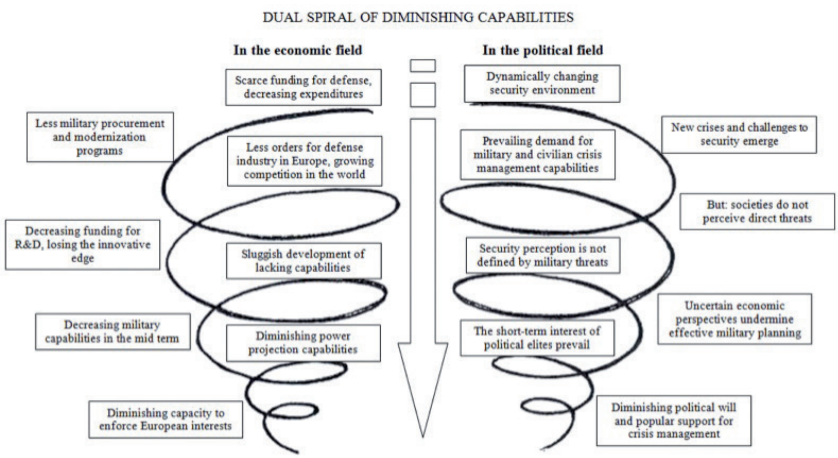
Introduction

In recent years, Europe has witnessed a dynamic deterioration of its security environment, while lacking both the political will and the necessary tools of power to counter this unfavorable trend. Despite observing these trends and emerging crises, Europe has remained unable to forecast strategic shocks such as the Arab Spring or the Ukraine Crisis, and remained incapable of managing crises in the European neighborhood (North Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe). First, the paper provides a brief assessment of how the European strategic landscape has evolved since the 2008 financial crisis and what impact this had on defense spending across Europe. I argue that the strong limitations on European defense sectors were consequences of simultaneous negative economic and political processes, creating a 'dual spiral of diminishing capabilities' in these domains. The article further examines how it would be possible to break this 'dual spiral of diminishing capabilities' at a time when not even the Ukraine crisis was a trigger strong enough to overturn these negative trends throughout Central and Eastern Europe, and offers a 'reality check' of how European countries from the Baltics through the Visegrad Four to Romania and Bulgaria have so far implemented the decisions and pledges undertaken in Wales.

The dual spiral of diminishing capabilities

Rapid and dynamic changes in our security environment have characterized the strategic context both from within Europe and in the European neighborhood since the 2008 implementation report of the European Security Strategy. These changes, along with new emerging challenges have repeatedly revealed that Europe possesses only limited capabilities to react and to respond in order to pursue European interests, and to restore stability and peace in the European neighborhood, (Blockmans and Faleg 2015) that has unfavorably transformed from a 'Ring of Friends' to the 'Ring of Fire' (Economist, 2014), while Europe itself has been shaken by the effects of the 2008 financial and economic crisis (CSIS 2012, 3-8.; Larrabee et al. 2012; O'Donnell 2012).

Summing up the strategic developments of the period 2008-2013 (before the Ukraine conflict) that accompanied an overall scarcity of resources in the European defense sector, one could observe two parallel processes in the political and economic domains, bringing about the degradation of military capabilities and the weakening of the military tools of European power. These can be described as the 'dual spiral of diminishing capabilities' (Csiki, 2014 2-3).



In the economic domain the self-sustaining process of capability loss is triggered by scarce resources as a consequence of the 2008 crisis, which evolved from a primary (debt) crisis into a secondary (fiscal-monetary) crisis, bringing about deep societal and political consequences in several European countries, especially among Southern and Central European ones. Diminishing resources dedicated to the defense sector resulted in cutting armament modernization plans, R&D, as well as reducing procurements for national armed forces even in the short term. The reduced domestic orders and cut contracts for weapons systems and defense equipment increasingly forced European manufacturers to turn towards the world market where they face increased competition from the arms manufacturers of emerging major powers, while their resources for cutting edge R&D are being diminished.

As a result, the missing crisis management capabilities – such as strategic enablers – either had not been or have not fully been developed or suffered delays and shortcomings due to lack of the technological background and/or financing. The resulting medium-term loss of military capabilities also limits crisis management capabilities, thereby reducing Europe's ability for both power projection and the assertion of foreign policy interests in the European neighborhood (Mölling and Brune 2011).

In the political domain, the loss of capabilities stems from the interaction of internal and external factors. The rapid and dynamic transformation (deterioration) of the security environment (emerging crises and new types of threats) resulted in a sustained demand for military and civilian crisis management. However, European societies did not perceive direct, imminent (military) threats triggered by these areas of regional instability and local conflicts. This lack of perceived threats in a time of resource scarcities obviously meant that it was difficult to advocate funding defense budgets at a sustainable level (not to mention increasing them), when the very same economic crisis turned people's attention towards the non-military dimensions of security. In this period, the economic and social dimension of security was brought to the forefront, prioritizing welfare and employment issues. In such an environment, the short-term interests of elected political representatives (the effective management of the financial-economic crisis) and economic uncertainties (the scarcity of resources) overruled long-term strategic planning, necessary for meaningful capability development. The overall consequence of this was the diminishing political will and popular support for sacrificing funds for the development of defense capabilities, and refraining from a more active foreign policy and involvement in the crisis management efforts in the European neighborhood.

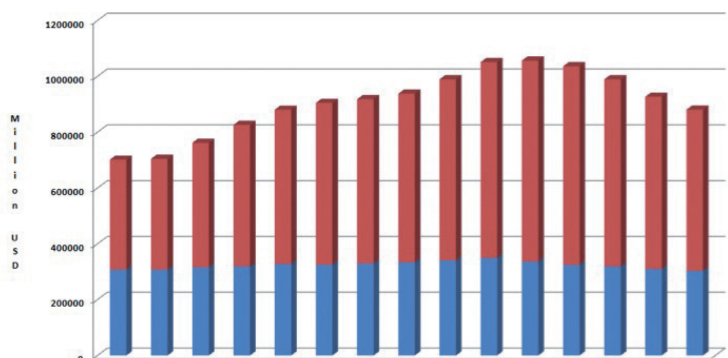
The key factor in these processes is as follows: while the incentives for European defense policy are clearly present and accounted for both by the political and military elite, short-term necessities and interests almost always overrule the steps necessary for medium- and long-term planning and capability development. Thus these two parallel downward spirals had triggered the loss of military capabilities even before the Ukraine crisis began and the threat of the so-called 'Islamic State' (ISIS) emerged in the European neighborhood, the same neighborhood which had already been characterized by instability and insecurity.

Measuring change – or the lack of it: trends in defense expenditures in Europe

The effects of the 2008 financial crisis within NATO could be measured, highlighting how the increased indebtedness and shrinking defense expenditures have been going hand-in-hand in most European countries. If we compare the data from a pre-crisis year (2006) with those from the post-crisis period (2012), we can see major increase in terms of national debt (74% increase for European NATO members in six years), coupled with a significant decrease in defense spending (-11.8%). This has been the case especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where the national debts had risen by 92%, while defense expenditures shrunk by more than 23% in the period 2006-2012 (Csiki, 2013a 6).

	Change in debt (2006-2012)	Change in defense expenditures (2006-2012)
NATO-28	+71.69%	-9.75%
NATO Europe	+74.00%	-11.80%
NATO Western Europe	+77.00%	-0.50%
NATO Central and Eastern Europe	+92.00%	-23.10%
NATO South Europe and Balkans	+65.00%	-14.00%

The uneven mid-term burden-sharing patterns within NATO are also alarming. If we observe the trends of defense spending for the alliance as a whole since the turn of the millennium, we can see that aggregate non-US military expenditures have only increased by about 15% at the height of the period (2009) when the most intensive phase of operations in Afghanistan began, and by 2014 have returned to the same level as in 2000 – despite the effects of the Arab Spring, subsequent crises in the MENA region and lately in Eastern Europe (SIPRI Military Expenditures Database, 2015).[7]

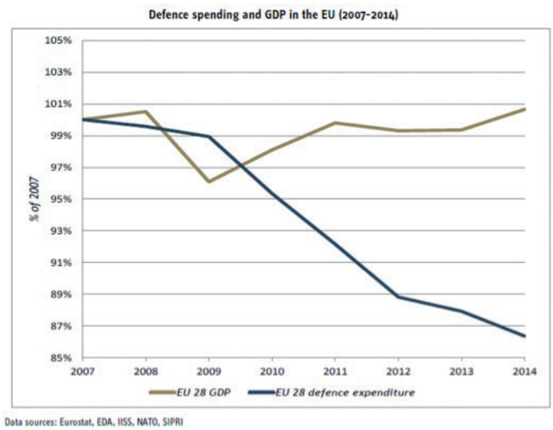


	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
U.S.	394097	397298	446089	507723	553378	579768	588771	604229	648932	700984	720220	711338	670897	617687	577511
Non-U.S. NATO	307617	307360	315888	318518	327070	325246	329254	333685	340592	350028	336395	324667	318552	309279	303174

(Constant USD 2011 exchange rate
2000: NATO-19, 2004: NATO-26, 2009- : NATO-28)
Source: SIPRI MilEx, 2015

[7] However, it is worth to note that U.S. defense spending increased to an irregularly high level as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks, fueling the global war on terror, and the high levels of U.S. defense spending have also been triggered by the global roles and responsibilities the country undertakes. The expenditure that had been higher than Cold War extremes naturally distorted burden-sharing, but the underperformance in this regard on behalf of other allies has made the situation even more unbalanced.

The unsustainable nature of this unbalanced situation has repeatedly been highlighted by various NATO officials over the years – but (maybe) surprisingly the downward trend of defense expenditures has not been reversed. Not even when the economic performance of the European countries has stabilized, and following the 2008-2009 recession returned to modest growth since 2010. European defense spending in real value has continued to decrease by more than 13% if compared with the last pre-crisis year, 2007 (Wolf 2015, 2).

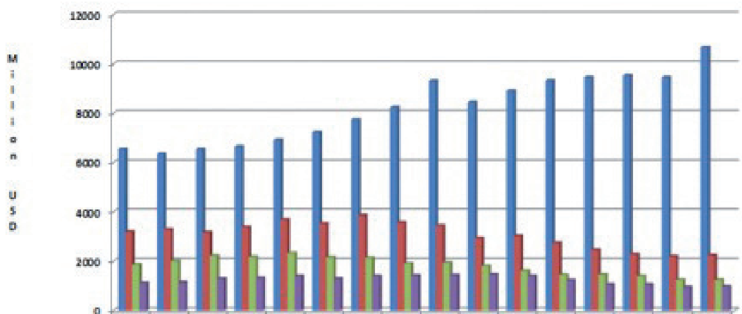


The Newport Summit of 2014 was hoped to bring the winds of change with regards to European defense efforts. Triggered by their changing threat perception, NATO members adopted the Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond and the Wales Summit Declaration in September 2014, renewing their commitment to boosting the development of military capabilities, and also committing themselves to the 'defense pledge' for increasing the defense expenditures. Such positive turn has been expected building upon the Defense Pledge as a consequence of emerging threats and new challenges in the European neighborhood in the East and South alike (NATO 2014 point 14). Heading towards the Warsaw Summit, we are still to see if the political commitment to move member states' defense budgets towards the 2% threshold and provide 20% of the funds for procurement would be realized in the mid-term, as follow-up reactions have been varied (Raynova and Kearns 2015).

However, we cannot be overly optimistic with regard to defense expenditures in Europe for several reasons. The trends within NATO do not support the positive expectations: despite repeated calls since 2011 when Smart Defense has been initiated, the alliance-wide defense expenditure has been shrinking on average. Even though Brussels (and Washington) would expect 2% of the gross domestic product to be spent on defense by each member state, and the goal after the financial crisis was to keep defense expenditure leveled at least, and then gradually move towards the 2% threshold, we have witnessed exactly the opposite trend. In 2006 1.72% of the GDP was spent on defense by the then 26

NATO member states on average; in 2010 it was 1.65% by the 28 allies, while in 2014 it fell to 1.38 percent – according to the data provided by SIPRI Military Expenditures Database.

This trend can be observed in the case of the Visegrad countries as well. With the exception of Poland, defense expenditures begun to decrease practically from 2005/2006 on, thus by the end of the 1999-2014 period (since joining NATO) Hungary has nominally lost 33% of its defense budget, the Czech Republic has lost 30%, while Slovakia has lost 24% since its accession in 2004 (SIPRI Military Expenditures Database, 2015).



	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Poland	6544	6351	6545	6657	6920	7235	7734	8235	9309	8452	8913	9327	9455	9536	9457	10673
Czech Republic	3206	3306	3180	3398	3690	3541	3872	3577	3449	2941	3027	2748	2474	2298	2199	2251
Hungary	1878	2020	2230	2174	2336	2162	2141	1919	1955	1817	1619	1452	1472	1401	1252	1249
Slovak Republic	1114	1158	1304	1321	1401	1302	1411	1431	1439	1474	1410	1233	1061	1060	960	984

(Constant USD 2011 exchange rate)
Source: SIPRI MilEx, 2015

The key question remains: can the above trend be reversed in the spirit of the 2014 Defense Pledge? NATO estimates for 2015 were short of such commitment: not only uneven burden sharing, but the downward trend also seems to have persisted throughout 2015. These estimates – based on current prices in USD 2015 exchange rate – include a 5.32% decrease for the whole alliance compared to 2014, a 16.02% decrease for NATO Europe, with the United States mostly preserving its contribution to defense efforts with 0.66% decrease in its defense budget (NATO 2015, 4).

Pledges, political commitment and implementation in Eastern and Central Europe

When we examine the follow-up reactions to the Wales Summit decisions in the short-term – or we ask the question: to what extent did NATO members fulfill the Defense Pledge signed in Newport? On closer look, we get a mixed picture. Clearly, there is a major division within the European member states of NATO regarding the extent the Eastern Flank versus the Southern Flank should determine defense, deterrence and reassurance measures. Driven by diverging threat perceptions (Russia and the Ukraine conflict vs. instability in North Africa and the threat of the 'Islamic State' in the Middle East) and fueled by weak economic performance, Western and Southern European countries have shown limited willingness to increase their defense expenditures. Criticism was strong especially towards great powers (Germany, France and the United Kingdom), triggering decisions for moderate mid-term increase only (Raynova and Kearns 2015, 2-4). The first news of planned meaningful change based on national priorities in Germany appeared first in March 2015, planning for an annual 2 billion euro increase beyond 2016 (Bloomberg 2015). Others, however, were lacking progress.

The situation has been fundamentally different among the Baltic states, Eastern and Southeastern European countries, which as a consequence of perceiving the threat of possible Russian activities aimed at the destabilization and ongoing militarization of Eastern Europe, began to realize the Defense Pledge already in 2014. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have contracted defense procurements for various equipment including tanks, missiles, anti-tank weapons, combat vehicles, and others worth more than 300 million euros, just in 2014. Moreover, Estonia reportedly planned to raise its defense budget to 2.05 percent of GDP; Lithuania to 1.1 percent from 0.89, while Latvia planned a one percent increase in 2015 from its previous 0.91 percent (Telegraph 2014). Lithuania undertook significant steps to boost its defense capabilities: strengthened its citizens' militia to 8,000 volunteers in 2014, decided to create a 2,500 strong rapid reaction force (Defense News 2014), and plans to reintroduce military conscription (BBC 2015). Latvia plans to grow its military to 6,600 members by 2018 from the current 4,600 and plans to increase the number of reservists to 12,000 by 2020 from the current 8,000 (Defense News 2015a). Beyond NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence Estonia hosted the first NATO Force Integration Unit (NFIU) in the region and is one of the few countries already meeting the 2% target for defense spending in terms of GDP.

Meanwhile, Central European countries have shown varied reactions to the Ukraine conflict and dissent regarding the suitable reactions to Russia's aggression. On the one hand, Poland, with defense expenditures already surpassing 2% of the GDP, has continued with its defense reform and sustained the momentum of the armed forces' modernization that had begun in 2009. Voicing strong concerns about the potential threat posed by Russia, Poland became a leading force for boosting defense efforts within NATO. Besides investing in high-profile equipment, like a missile shield, anti-aircraft systems, cruise missiles, armored personnel carriers, submarines, combat drones, multi-purpose helicopters and others, Warsaw has also attempted to harmonize regional defense cooperation efforts with the Baltic states (more successfully) and within the Visegrad countries (less successfully) (Defense News 2015b).

Other Visegrad countries, however, seemed to have perceived events in Eastern Europe in a somewhat different manner, seemingly neglecting possible military threats, and were less keen on voicing heated anti-Russian opinion. It was telling that unlike before the Chicago Summit in 2012, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia did not issue a joint V4 declaration with Poland ahead of the 2014 Wales Summit on shared defense policy perspectives. But the somewhat diverging perceptions did not mean the break-up of Central European defense cooperation, and gradually the other three members of the V4 have also begun to move on a path of strengthening their defense efforts. We may argue that eventually the deteriorating security environment both in the East and South has triggered a response also in Prague, Bratislava and Budapest, providing an opportunity to argue for increasing national defense budgets and possibly kick starting the long-neglected modernization programs of the armed forces.

As part of these efforts, the Czech Republic had decided to increase defense expenditures by 0.1 percent of the GDP (4 billion Kč) a year from 2015 on, and the defense spending is slated to rise from 41 billion Kč in 2014 to 71.5 billion Kč in 2020 (a 74.4% increase in nominal value). What is more, in March 2015, senior government officials announced that the Czech Defense Ministry was working on a draft bill to restore conscription and a decision could be taken in June. In addition to that, plans have been drafted to expand the military from the current 16,600 troops to 24,000-27,000 troops by 2025 (Prague Post 2014; Defense News 2015c). Furthermore, major modernization plans have also been adopted, foreseeing the procurement of helicopters, armored vehicles and radars – all of them replacing Soviet-era Russian technology with NATO equipment (Defense News 2015d).

Slovakia, on the other hand had remained reluctant to announce the increase in defense expenditures for a long time, right until the Wales Summit. In Newport, President Andrej Kiska pledged to increase Slovak defense spending to 1.6 percent of GDP by 2020 and to commit to stemming the drop in spending, in addition to allocating 20 percent of the annual defense budget by 2016 for modernizing the Slovak military. Regarding modernization plans, a fighter acquisition or lease plan (possibly for JAS-39 Gripen) was announced to replace Russian-made MiG-29s; and UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters are to replace Mi-17 helicopters (Globalsecurity 2015; Defense News 2015e).

Hungary in recent years has succeeded in sustaining its defense expenditure at nominal value, and minor increases had been seen since 2013. In accordance with a 2012 government decision, a 0.1% increase of the defense spending in terms of GDP is expected and now planned for from 2016 onwards. During the parliamentary debate of the 2016 state budget, a request for 298.6 billion Forints has been filed – an increase of 19.2% from 2014, but only reaching 0.84% of the GDP forecast for 2015. As mentioned above, the government shall provide for additional 0.1% increase in term of GDP in subsequent years, moving towards 1.4% of the GDP in the period 2016-2022 (Csiki 2013b, 11). However, the increases in funding are not dedicated for modernization programs, but to fund a new military career model that had been introduced in 2015, thus to providing the funds necessary for increased personnel costs. Despite the worn-out condition of many major equipment types of the Hungarian Defense Forces, the only meaningful procurement program in place addresses the purchase of a number of multi-purpose helicopters, for which extra government funds would be provided beyond the planned defense budget (Hungary Today 2015).

Amidst the preparations to adopt a new defense strategy in 2015, Romanian parties committed themselves to increasing defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2017 and to maintain it for a decade, until 2027 (Jane's 2015). Recent armed forces modernization programs have highlighted developing allied missile defense and completing the purchase of tactical transport aircraft, while the upcoming developments will include hosting a NATO Force Integration Unit and the Multinational Division South-East Headquarters in Bucharest, which will coordinate military command in Romania and the neighboring Bulgaria. The multinational headquarters will open in 2016 and become fully operational by 2018 (New York Times 2015).

Due to sustained financial constraints, Bulgaria – another country to host an NFIU in the region – is yet to follow the opposite path, reaching the lowest level of defense spending in ten years, spending 1.16% of GDP, or 979 million BGN in 2015 (Novonite 2015). A new development plan for the armed forces is currently under negotiation and increasing defense expenses that would allow for major procurements is planned from 2016 on (Sofia Globe 2015).

Conclusions: breaking the dual spiral of diminishing capabilities

The alarming trends of declining defense efforts described above as the dual spiral of diminishing capabilities – seems to have – changed in the course of 2014 when resulting from the two new crises (Ukraine, ISIS), the citizenry and governments across Europe alike began to perceive direct and indirect military threats. These threats took both symmetric (conventional armed conflict on European soil) and asymmetric forms (terrorism, or the threat of Russian-backed destabilization). Regarding the military conflict in Ukraine, the Baltic states, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria were the most concerned (Bugajski 2014), while regarding the 'Islamic State' and terrorism, primarily France and the United Kingdom were subjects to perceiving such threats (BBC 2014, Pierini 2014), even though warning calls have been issued in almost every European country.

These examples might have also shown us the possible ways to breaking the dual spiral of diminishing capabilities through changing the threat perception: through identifying direct, imminent or close threats in the military domain. This can be reinforced through intensifying political, media and societal discourse about defense matters. If coupled with the necessary support in the economic realm (increasing the defense expenditures), these changes may result in sustainable mid- to long-term strategic planning, boost in procurement and R&D, as well as more conscious and better-grounded crisis management efforts in the future.

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