Chapter 4
Implications for NATO’s
Force Planning

This examination of the security environment, NATO nations’ objectives, and a strategy for advancing those objectives suggests some clear implications for force planners. First, the overwhelming majority of NATO’s military activities in the coming years will take place at a considerable remove from the home stations of most forces. The most likely NATO shaping and coping operations, such as conducting joint exercises with PfP states, monitoring compliance with international agreements, or helping to enforce peace in the Balkans, will take place beyond even the enlarged NATO treaty area. Even potential Article V operations—coming to the aid of a NATO member state, such as Turkey, for example, that might be the target of aggression—will be of an expeditionary nature for most of NATO’s forces.

This assessment suggests strongly that the forces most useful for NATO will be those that are capable of rapid deployment and are postured for expeditionary operations. This means more than buying additional military transportation assets, although these are indispensable to force mobility. It means investing in logistics and support assets that are either forward based or can move as rapidly as the forces they support. Air bases in and around NATO’s new member states should be upgraded as well. We have seen, for example, that air bases in Hungary can support fighter aircraft operations over the former Yugoslavia. Likewise, bases in eastern Romania or Bulgaria could support fighter operations over the Black Sea, Turkey, and Ukraine. The value of forward operating bases such as these is greatly magnified if preparations have been made in advance to support high-tempo operations. Depending on the base, such preparations might entail repairs to runways or facilities, enhancements to fuel storage and pumping capabilities, prepositioning of ground support equipment and munitions, and improvements to the physical security of the facility.
Ground forces, too, need to have access to a wide array of support assets to sustain operations away from home. They can be transported with the units or, conceivably, prepositioned in areas of likely deployment. Either way, the costs of posturing forces for true expeditionary operations can be significant, independent of the price of their transportation assets.

As planners in NATO countries consider ways to adapt their forces to these demands, they would do well not to consider existing operational concepts and force structures as given. As some elements of the coalition forces’ campaign in the Gulf War showed and the air campaign over Kosovo confirmed, military operations can be transformed through a combination of new capabilities for surveying activities on the battlefield, dynamically controlling military operations, and engaging and attacking targets with guided weapons. In particular, it appears that lighter, more-mobile forces can, by exploiting advances in information and firepower, accomplish key operational tasks that were previously the primary domain of heavy, armored forces.

Aircraft and artillery, for example, have traditionally been regarded as useful in disrupting, delaying, or “softening up” enemy ground forces. As such, their role was to support friendly ground forces whose job it was to administer the coup de grace in a close battle. Today, modern reconnaissance, communication, and computing capabilities, coupled with precision munitions, are allowing modern militaries to engage and destroy mobile ground forces at unprecedented levels of effectiveness with airpower and longer-range fires. Over time, the adoption of novel operational concepts along these lines will shift the division of labor on many battlefields to forces that may be more easily adapted to the demands of expeditionary operations than a traditional mix of heavy, mechanized ground forces and supporting fires.¹ Hence, the modernization of NATO’s military forces, which is needed to meet the demands of a new strategy and a changing threat environment, may have the added benefit of facilitating the transition of NATO’s forces to a more expeditionary posture.

¹ For an analysis of the potential of modernized joint forces to defeat an armored invasion, see David Ochmanek et al., To Find and Not to Yield: How Advances in Information and Firepower Can Transform Theater Warfare, RAND, MR-958-AF, 1998.
NATO nations have adopted a broad-based Defense Capabilities Initiative (DCI), intended to accelerate the fielding of military capabilities best suited to the new environment and challenges NATO faces. The primary objectives of the DCI are to provide forces that are more capable of effective expeditionary operations outside of the treaty area and that are more interoperable with those of other NATO nations. Special emphasis is being placed on enhancements to capabilities for collecting, processing, and exploiting information; accelerated procurement of advanced munitions; and improved capabilities for operating in environments that may be contaminated by weapons of mass destruction. The DCI seeks to stimulate progress in five key areas: deployability, sustainability, effective engagement, survivability, and communications.

Neither extensive force modernization nor the purchase of new transportation and mobile logistics assets will come cheaply. NATO’s European members are planning to make gradual improvements, but progress will be uneven and many nations will find themselves unable to modernize their forces rapidly or extensively. A gap exists, therefore, between the forward-looking rhetoric of NATO’s new strategic concept and the capabilities of many of NATO’s forces to support the missions inherent in that concept. This gap will remain for some time to come, even in a best-case scenario. Allies can contribute to combined operations, in other ways, however—for example, by taking steps to facilitate operations by deployed forces on or through their territories. Assured access to en route bases in central and southern Europe is crucial to U.S. airlift operations in the eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf regions. By upgrading facilities at selected airfields, such countries as Poland, Romania, and Turkey can help ensure prompt and effective operations by NATO forces during peacetime, crisis, or conflict.