

# Countering hybrid threats

## The role of the Joint Expeditionary Force

Dick Zandee  
Adája Stoetman

Clingendael Report



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# Introduction

Russia's war in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the international order that is based on norms and values of state sovereignty and international law. While the Balkan wars in the nineties were the result of internal turmoil leading to the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict marks the return of large-scale interstate warfare in Europe for the first time since the end of the Second World War. A year after the Russian invasion was launched on 24 February 2022, valuable lessons can already be drawn for the characteristics of modern warfare. The conflict has shown – both in the run-up to the invasion as well as after the start of the war – that non-military aspects are part of Russia's strategy. Well-known examples are the abuse of the European 'oil and gas dependency' on Russia, the spread of disinformation, cyberattacks and the channelling of refugees and migration flows. What these means have in common is that they are aimed at undermining the unity of the West and destabilising their societies and democracies. This very complex set of *hybrid threats* raises new questions on *how to respond* to them, as the hybrid domain requires the involvement of many different actors at the national and international level: from various ministries and even private companies (such as the energy sector) to the EU and NATO.

As hybrid challenges have become an integral part of modern conflict, the question has arisen what kind of role should be laid down for the armed forces. Hybrid challenges are very often of a transboundary and non-military nature. Therefore, they have to be addressed primarily by civil actors. But in addition, the military can also play a role in countering hybrid threats, and this raises the question of the role of multinational (military) formats such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). The JEF is a multinational military formation of northern European countries with the United Kingdom as the lead nation. Since 2019, the JEF has increasingly focused its activities on the hybrid domain. The war in Ukraine has been a catalyst for increased cooperation in the JEF context at the political, policy and military operational levels. The Russian threat, both physically (conventional forces) and virtually/digitally, has become the main focus of attention. It is in the latter category of threats that the JEF Nations are struggling with the question of what its role should be.

This report explores the possible role of the JEF in hybrid conflicts and how cooperation in the JEF can be attained. The first chapter addresses the role of military forces in responding to hybrid threats and what the JEF has realised in this context so far. Particular attention will be given to the challenges of but also the opportunities for connecting military activities with those of non-military actors. The second chapter focusses on the roles of NATO and the EU in the hybrid domain and how the JEF could relate to the efforts of these international organisations. The potential impact of the future NATO membership of Finland and Sweden – both JEF Participating Nations – is also addressed. The third chapter zooms in on the potential of the JEF's role and functions in the hybrid domain and how this should be implemented. The growing political character of the JEF cooperation is also addressed. The report ends with a list of conclusions and recommendations for the Netherlands.

The methodology used for this report consists of a mix of literature research and a series of interviews with government representatives and members of think tanks in a selection of JEF Nations as well as with staff officers at the JEF Headquarters, at the NATO Headquarters and at EU institutions. These interviews were held under the application of the Chatham House rule. The authors are grateful to all interviewees for their valuable contributions.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The authors are grateful to Mik Dijkman for her valuable contributions to the report.

# 1 Searching for the JEF's role in the hybrid domain

## Hybrid conflicts

For the past few years, conflicts and wars have been increasingly moving away from a purely military nature, instead becoming increasingly hybrid in character. In warfare, adversaries have always tried to achieve their political-strategic goals through the application of a variety of different means, or so-called 'instruments of power'. Traditionally, there are four instruments of power: diplomatic, information, military and economic. However, instruments of power have also changed over time, with three more novel instruments gaining relative importance: finance, intelligence and law enforcement. This has led to the transition from DIME to DIME-FIL.<sup>2</sup> Characteristic of these hybrid threats is that these instruments are very often used in a combined and synchronised manner to achieve the desired effects.<sup>3</sup> Examples of the more novel application of such means include, but are not limited to, cyberattacks, the spread of disinformation and election interference. These activities can be referred to as hybrid activities.

Furthermore, the potential targets of such activities have altered, with an increasing focus on targets in the non-military domain. For instance, hybrid activities might be directed at critical infrastructure, such as hospitals or underwater cables. Essential in this regard is that hybrid activities are often targeted at a state's critical functions, which can be described as "activities or operations distributed across the political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure (PMESII) spectrum which, if discontinued, could lead to a disruption of services that a working system [...] depends on".<sup>4</sup> Key in this regard is that the adversary will try to look for vulnerabilities in one or more of these dimensions, so that it is able to exploit these to achieve its goals. Unfortunately, the internet, social media and other technological improvements

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2 Cesar Augusto Rodriguez, Timothy Charles Walton, and Hyong Chu, '[Putting the "FIL" into "DIME". Growing Joint Understanding of the Instruments of Power](#)', in: Joint Force Quarterly, Issue 97, 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2020, p. 121-128.

3 [MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project: Understanding Hybrid Warfare](#), January 2017, p. 11.

4 Ibid.



– which have so many positive applications – also offer tremendous scope for abuse, such as influencing election campaigns, spreading fake news and false images with a very high tempo.

Although there is still a great deal of debate on what ‘hybrid conflict’ exactly entails<sup>5</sup>, there is a common understanding that it is in nature very complex and poses the necessary challenges for countries. The application of these methods can sow doubts among populations, thereby destabilising and undermining societies.<sup>6</sup> The severe complexity of hybrid conflicts stems partly from the different, non-traditional and non-military instruments that can be used simultaneously by the adversary, thereby posing a wide variety of possible threats as each vulnerability can easily be abused. In addition, adding to the complexity is the difficulty in detecting the hybrid activities’ origins, assessing their potential impact, their low visibility and the diversity of the actors involved in addressing these challenges. The latter is proving to be an exceptional challenge, as it requires countries to adjust the way in which they deal with security. These adjustments apply both to the way in which a country’s first security provider, the military, operates, as well as to how a country’s government expands the scope of the actors involved in addressing security matters.

A very recent example that demonstrates the complexity of contemporary conflicts is the war in Ukraine. At the beginning of the war, when Russia invaded its neighbouring country, Moscow applied hybrid methods in an attempt to destabilise Ukraine and create chaos in the country so that it could more easily take advantage of this to pursue its strategic objectives. Activities included espionage, cyberattacks and internet-based disinformation.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Ukraine’s cyber authority was quick to declare that Ukraine is fighting a war in the digital realm, in addition to the war on the ground.<sup>8</sup> As an example: already at the onset of the war, European officials who assisted Ukrainian refugees were targeted with malicious software, in an attempt to disrupt their efforts. Some question the degree of success of these activities, however. But it has not

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5 See for a more detailed elaboration on the concept ‘hybrid threats’: Dick Zandee, Sico van der Meer & Adája Stoetman, [Countering hybrid threats: steps for improving EU-NATO cooperation](#), the Clingendael Institute, October 2021.

6 NATO, [NATO’s response to hybrid threats](#), last updated: 10 February 2023.

7 Weilong Kong & Tim Marler, [‘Ukraine’s Lessons for the Future of Hybrid Warfare’](#), *National Interest*, 25 November 2022.

8 Joe Tidy, [‘Ukraine says it is fighting first ‘hybrid war’](#)’, BBC, 4 March 2022.

only been Russia that has increasingly made use of these tactics. As a counter-reaction to Russia's hybrid activities, Ukraine made use of its rather open society through actively using the digital domain, including social media. For instance, Ukrainian authorities used social media and messaging apps to spread images of prisoners of war, including some being humiliated or intimidated – thereby violating the Geneva Conventions.<sup>9</sup> The fact that unconventional, hybrid means, as opposed to military means, are playing a relatively more important role than before demonstrates that conflicts and wars have increasingly gained a whole-of-society character.

## The JEF's record in the hybrid domain

The increasingly hybrid character of conflicts and warfare requires from the militaries around the world to adjust the way in which they operate and address the most pressing security matters. This also applies to existing military cooperation formats, like the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). The JEF (see box) is by its very nature a military cooperation format consisting of ten European countries, that was established in 2014 as one of NATO's Framework Nations Concepts (FNC).<sup>10</sup> Although the JEF has been established as a NATO FNC formation, it is not a NATO-earmarked force. This allowed for participation by two non-NATO countries in 2014 (Finland, Sweden). The JEF can be deployed under the umbrella of NATO or other international organisations, but also as a stand-alone force directly deployed by the Lead Nation and one or more Participating Nations (PNs).

Through the FNC model, NATO encourages multinational groups within the Alliance to develop deployable capabilities, led by a 'framework nation'. For the JEF, the 'framework nation' is the United Kingdom, which provides the necessary command and control structure through the Standing Joint Force Headquarters (SJFHQ) in Northwood. The JEF was established as "a rapidly deployable force capable of conducting the full spectrum of operations, including high intensity

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9 Human Rights Watch, '[Ukraine: Respect the Rights of Prisoners of War. Published Footage of Captured Soldiers Violates Geneva Conventions](#)', 16 March 2022.

10 Definition of NATO's Framework Nations Concept: "groups of Allies coming together to work multinationally for the joint development of forces and capabilities required by the Alliance, facilitated by a framework nation". Source: NATO, '[Wales Summit Declaration](#)', paragraph 67, 5 September 2014.

operations”.<sup>11</sup> Given its composition, the JEF focusses its activities on Northern Europe, including the High North, the North Atlantic region and the Baltic Sea region.

### The Joint Expeditionary Force

**Established:** 2014

**Operational:** June 2018

**JEF Nations:** United Kingdom (Lead Nation) and Participating Nations (PNs): Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden

**Decision to deploy:** opt-in model, in which the UK should always be involved + at least one other country (UK+ xPN)

However, with the shifting nature of security threats, military cooperation formats must look for how they can be of added value in the process of coping with these kinds of challenges. This also applies to the JEF, which is in search of its role in the hybrid domain. In July 2021, the JEF countries declared in their policy direction that it needs “to be able to respond effectively to competitors operating in the space below the threshold of conventional conflict”<sup>12</sup>, thereby acknowledging the importance of the hybrid domain in contemporary warfare. Ever since then, the JEF seeks to gain a more active role in tackling hybrid threats. At the most recent JEF Leaders’ Meeting in Riga (Latvia) in December 2022, the JEF Nations reaffirmed their commitment to addressing hybrid threats by stating that they have agreed “to accelerate cooperation in tackling hybrid threats, with a focus on deterring and defending against threats to our shared subsea data and energy infrastructure”<sup>13</sup>, most likely prompted by the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline in September 2022.

Moving beyond political statements, the JEF has tried to make headway in its objective to address hybrid threats. This progress primarily stems from JEF exercises. In particular the Joint Protector 21 and 22 exercises are of relevance

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11 NATO, [Wales Summit Declaration](#), paragraph 67, 5 September 2014.

12 [Joint Expeditionary Force \(JEF\) – Policy direction](#), 12 July 2021.

13 [Joint Expeditionary Force leaders’ statement: 19 December 2022](#).

here, as specific attention was devoted to the deployment and operation of the JEF in sub-threshold or grey zone situations. JEF exercises are usually military live exercises. The Joint Protector 21 exercise was a command-post exercise and did not include any military hardware. Rather, the exercise brought together approximately 500 people from the ten JEF Nations in an attempt to test the ability of the JEF Headquarters to provide the necessary command and control structures for when a sub-threshold crisis would emerge.<sup>14</sup> These kinds of exercises reap serious benefits as they show where the JEF already operates effectively and where there is still room for improvement. One of the main lessons of the Joint Protector 21 exercise was that for JEF to be able to successfully operate in sub-threshold situations, more and different non-military expertise is required at the headquarters. The exercise provided this expertise, which was claimed to be very useful, in particular as the military command was searching for answers to the dilemma of how to act and whom to contact on the civil side as Joint Protector 21 progressed.<sup>15</sup>

But a military cooperation format that increasingly has to operate in a non-traditional and non-military domain poses the necessary challenges, but can also bring about opportunities. These challenges and opportunities are set out below.

## Challenges

The biggest challenge is the lack of consensus among the JEF Nations as to the extent to which the JEF should be involved outside the scope of the military domain. All JEF Nations regard the latter as the JEF's core business and hence its strongest hand. However, PNs bordering Russia underline the added value of the JEF in its military role, while others show more willingness to explore the scope of what the JEF can contribute in the hybrid domain.<sup>16</sup> For that reason, it is of the utmost importance to define more clearly what role and functions the JEF could have in the hybrid domain (see chapter 3).

A military cooperation framework that seeks to be active in a non-military domain to safeguard security is in essence already a challenge in itself. Given the

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14 Sean Monaghan, 'The Joint Expeditionary Force: Towards a Stronger and More Capable European Defense?', *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 12 November 2021.

15 Information from interviews.

16 Information from interviews.

dynamic nature of hybrid threats, it is impossible for the military to address these kinds of threats by themselves. Considering that the methods used by adversaries are most likely of a non-military nature and that the targets are very often civilian lead one to conclude that addressing hybrid threats requires the involvement of actors that are different from solely the military. In essence, a Whole-of-Government (WoG) or even a Whole-of-Society (WoS) approach is necessary in order to be able to counter these threats. The required involvement of a broad range of actors, at least from various government departments, is acknowledged by the JEF, as can be derived from its policy direction which states that “the challenge of sub-threshold competition in particular may require bringing together the military instrument with other levers of government”<sup>17</sup>. This closely ties in with one of the primary lessons of the Joint Protector 21 exercise: that there is a need for the presence of non-military expertise at the headquarters in order to be able to effectively operate in the sub-threshold area.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, as the hybrid domain is largely civilian in nature, it might be difficult for military cooperation frameworks to operate in this environment. This has partly to do with the fact that the military is not used to operating in such environments, but it mainly stems from the national legislative and regulatory limitations.<sup>19</sup> For example, in a country like the Netherlands, one of the three core tasks of the military is to support civilian authorities where necessary. But the room for manoeuvre is very restricted, especially when it comes to the privacy domain, in which the military finds its hands increasingly tied by legal restrictions.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in a country like Norway the Constitution prescribes that the military is not allowed to act domestically other than in warfare and only in very exceptional cases. This is primarily the responsibility of the police forces. Considering that hybrid threats are very often targeted at a country’s national critical infrastructure, this makes it very difficult for the military to have a role.<sup>21</sup> Closely tied to this is the fact that the activities of a military cooperation framework, like the JEF, can easily be slowed down by bureaucratic tendencies, which is especially relevant with regard to addressing and countering hybrid threats involving a broad range of non-military actors. This becomes even more

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17 [Joint Expeditionary Force \(JEF\) – Policy direction](#), 12 July 2021.

18 Information from interviews.

19 Information from interviews.

20 Karel Berkhout, ‘[De internetninja’s van de krijgsmacht lopen stuk op een privacymuur](#)’, NRC, 26 januari 2023.

21 Information from interviews.

complicated when the different ministries involved are severely stove piped, making smooth cooperation among them extremely difficult, thereby also hindering effective and quick action by the JEF.

The JEF's composition and flexibility can be a virtue, but could also prove to be a vice. The so-called UK+ xPN format implies that JEF deployment is dependent on the UK's willingness to act, as the lead nation always needs to provide its approval for and participation in JEF deployment. Correspondingly, the flexible nature of the JEF naturally implies that there are no binding commitments in place.<sup>22</sup> This lack of binding commitments also complicates military planning processes, as it is not known in advance which capabilities will be available to the JEF. Hence, there is a certain degree of uncertainty about the commitment of the JEF countries, arising from the non-binding nature of the JEF, which can prove to be a serious challenge.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, other NATO member states may have misperceptions about the role of the JEF, primarily with regard to its military functions, and perhaps influenced by the increasing political character of the JEF's activities, in particular the growing number of Leaders' Meetings (see chapter 3).<sup>24</sup> Such misperceptions should be countered, also as the JEF's role in the hybrid domain might even raise more questions among non-JEF Allies.

## Advantages

Despite the difficulties that might come along with a military cooperation format having to operate in a rather complex and unfamiliar domain, the JEF also has a number of advantages. One of the biggest claimed virtues of the JEF is its flexibility. As the JEF policy direction states, "the JEF is designed with flexibility at its heart".<sup>25</sup> The deployment of the JEF does not require consensus among the ten JEF Nations. It is sufficient if the UK and one other PN agree to deployment, although it can be expected that the consent of all PNs might be preferred –

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22 Eva Hagström Frisell & Emma Sjökvist, *Military Cooperation Around Framework Nations: A European Solution to the Problem of Limited Defence Capabilities*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019.

23 Information from interviews.

24 Information from interviews.

25 [Joint Expeditionary Force \(JEF\) – Policy direction](#), 12 July 2021.

also depending on the crisis at hand.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, this flexible format of deployment offers the opportunity of rapid action by the JEF in case of a crisis and serving as a first responder.<sup>27</sup> Hence, the JEF is an accessible format to be used for certain missions. This is particularly true in comparison to NATO where unanimity among all thirty Allies is required in order to be able to act. This is why some have bluntly stated that “the JEF can act while NATO is thinking”.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, the inherent flexibility of the JEF makes it very well equipped to respond to hybrid threats that fall under the threshold of NATO’s Article 5. In such cases NATO might not always be the answer, as it might struggle to respond to events that do not strictly fall within the scope of collective defence. Moreover, closely tied to this argument is that the smaller composition of the JEF and the fact that it is not bound by NATO or EU frameworks and regulations, leaves room for experimenting.<sup>29</sup> This particularly applies to potential responses by the JEF in the hybrid domain: as the JEF is not tied to the rules and procedures of either NATO or the EU, it has the manoeuvring space to explore possible response options, something which would be more difficult to agree upon in the larger NATO or EU frameworks. In the case of practical application: at the basis of such a response must lie a request for military support from one JEF Nation to other JEF Nations. This military support will be executed under the legal basis of other departments of state of the requesting country. In this case JEF serves as an additional regional responder to a below the threshold national crisis which ascends national capabilities.

Another important opportunity can be seen in light of the JEF as a ‘gap filler’.<sup>30</sup> This applies to multiple areas, both thematical as well as regional. At a thematical level, and as previously mentioned, NATO might not always be the best equipped to respond to hybrid activities. In such situations, the JEF might prove to be valuable in filling this gap. In addition, the geographical location of the ten JEF Nations means that they have, to a substantial extent, shared threat perceptions and thus aligned security interests. As a result, the JEF is

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26 Information from interviews.

27 Sean Monaghan, [‘The Joint Expeditionary Force: Global Britain in Northern Europe?’](#), *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 25 March 2022.

28 Megan Eckstein, [‘New U.K.-Led Maritime First Responder Force Takes to Sea at BALTOPS’](#), *USNI News*, 21 June 2019.

29 Information from interviews.

30 Information from interviews.

uniquely focused on Northern Europe, a region that is becoming increasingly important and simultaneously increasingly contested – for example, due to rising geopolitical tensions in the Arctic. As the EU and NATO are organisations with a wide geographical scope due to their member states across Europe and beyond, more specific attention to regions like Northern Europe becomes increasingly difficult. This is partly due to the broader composition of these organisations, which leads to diverging security interests spread over multiple regions, making operations in specific regional areas more difficult.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the JEF can fill “a hole in the security architecture of northern Europe between a national force and a NATO force”.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the JEF, with its mixed membership of EU/non-EU countries and – as long as Finland and Sweden have not formally joined the Alliance – of NATO/non-NATO nations offers a ‘security bridge’ connecting the gaps between the JEF Nations’ non-overlapping membership of both organisations.

Considering the JEF’s military nature, one of the most prominent virtues of the cooperation format is its potential deterrent effect. Throughout its operational period, the armed forces of the JEF Nations have worked together to deter adversaries, including Russia, from aggression in the Northern European region. This also includes actions in order to deter adversaries from using hybrid methods against the partner countries. According to a 2022 JEF Defence Ministerial Meeting statement, this is done through “a series of integrated military activities across our part of northern Europe – at sea, on land and in the air”<sup>33</sup>. To illustrate this: in March 2021, the JEF conducted maritime patrols in the Baltic Sea, including vessels from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the UK. The purpose of the patrols was to demonstrate the countries’ commitment to security and stability in the Baltic Sea region.<sup>34</sup>

A final advantage of the JEF is that it provides a framework for advanced integration between the JEF Nations.<sup>35</sup> Strengthened integration would be a natural result of joint deployment, as the deployed forces would be prescribed to

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31 Sean Monaghan, *The Joint Expeditionary Force: Global Britain in Northern Europe?*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 25 March 2022.

32 MOD News Team Member, ‘[Defence in the media: Monday 1 July 2019](#)’, Ministry of Defence of the United Kingdom, 1 July 2019.

33 [Joint Expeditionary Force \(JEF\) – Policy direction](#), 12 July 2021.

34 See also: [https://www.mil.lv/sites/mil/files/document/JEF%20Brochure%20Apr\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mil.lv/sites/mil/files/document/JEF%20Brochure%20Apr_2022.pdf), p. 9.

35 See also: [https://www.mil.lv/sites/mil/files/document/JEF%20Brochure%20Apr\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mil.lv/sites/mil/files/document/JEF%20Brochure%20Apr_2022.pdf).



jointly operate with high levels of coordination. But even outside the context of deployment, the JEF offers the opportunity to strengthen integration levels and thus improve interoperability among the participating countries. This could for instance be the result of joint training, which allows the countries to practise the integration of their armed forces, which will eventually improve interoperability and cooperation when actual deployment occurs.<sup>36</sup>

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36 Strategic Command, 'Ready to Respond: What is the JEF?', United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, 11 May 2021.

## 2 The JEF: NATO and the EU

### NATO

The Alliance acknowledges that the primary responsibility to respond to hybrid threats or attacks rests with the targeted country. Nevertheless, “NATO is prepared to assist any Ally against hybrid threats as part of collective defence”, based on the decision of 2016 that hybrid actions against one or more Allies could lead to invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Although not publicly available, NATO has developed a strategy on its potential role in countering hybrid threats.<sup>37</sup> Potential contributions seem to be primarily of a deterrence nature (for example, by increased military presence as has been done after the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and through supporting non-NATO Allies and partner countries such as by sending hybrid support teams.<sup>38</sup> However, there is no consensus among the NATO member states on ‘how and when’ the Alliance should act in the hybrid domain. Some member states regard NATO action in this area as potentially provocative and escalatory. In their view, NATO should be called upon for high-end military tasks only, and not if the threats remain under the threshold of Article 5.<sup>39</sup>

Exactly for these reasons, the JEF offers an interesting format to act militarily in the grey conflict zone. NATO could profit from such a role, assuming that the JEF Lead Nation (or one or more PNs) keeps the North Atlantic Council (NAC) abreast of the situation and its activities in the hybrid domain. Sharing information with all NATO members is essential, in particular if the risk of the activation of Article 5 increases. It therefore remains of the utmost importance that the JEF has arrangements in place to transfer military command authority to NATO.<sup>40</sup> The JEF’s knowledge and experience, in particular through exercises, could also be shared with NATO as input for the implementation of the Alliance’s

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37 NATO, [NATO’s response to hybrid threats](#), last updated: 10 February 2023.

38 NATO has twice sent hybrid response teams (to Montenegro and Lithuania). In the case of Lithuania, it was mainly driven by the objective to send a political signal of solidarity (information from interviews).

39 Information from interviews.

40 This is already on the JEF agenda. Information from interviews.

strategy for the hybrid domain. In case of a future use of hybrid response teams, NATO could share its expertise with the JEF.

Finally, the regional orientation of the JEF is of great interest to NATO for three reasons. First, the High North is developing into a new area of geopolitical tensions as the Arctic ice is quickly melting. As NATO-Russia relations are unlikely to return to normality in the foreseeable future, the Alliance will have to pay more attention to the High North. Secondly, once Finland and Sweden have joined NATO, the role of the JEF as a 'gap filler' – short of Article 5 activation – becomes a shared interest of all JEF Nations. Therefore, arrangements for transferring from JEF deployment to NATO command will be easier to be agreed upon, tested and implemented. Thirdly, Finnish and Swedish membership makes it possible to share NATO's operational defence plans with the two countries, which will facilitate coordination with JEF planning and make the transitioning of command authority to the Alliance, when needed, somewhat easier.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the growing political role of the JEF has also raised eyebrows within NATO countries that do not belong to the group of JEF Nations. Some Allies also fear that the JEF's role in sub-threshold scenarios might lead to escalation, which could result in an Article 5 situation while non-JEF NATO members have had no say in the JEF's involvement and actions from the onset. Moreover, in particular Eastern European Allies could view the JEF's growing political role as an alternative to NATO – although institution-building is clearly not on the JEF's agenda. However, these doubts concerning the JEF's increasing political weight require a better strategic communication policy – for which the Lead Nation should be in charge, supported by the PNs as required.

## EU

The EU's wider set of responsibilities and tools makes the organisation better suited to play a bigger role in the hybrid domain in comparison to NATO. For that purpose, the EU already has different tools at its disposal, such as the Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox and the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Toolbox – the latter still being negotiated. The Strategic Compass, adopted by the European Council in March 2022, launched the development of an EU

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41 Information from interviews.

Hybrid Toolbox, which was finalised in December 2022. It can be described as a way of working within the EU to enhance coherence between the multitude of instruments that the EU and its member states have to offer in countering hybrid threats. Its aim is to ensure that in case of a hybrid attack, the EU can offer a well-informed, targeted and comprehensive response.<sup>42</sup> The initiative to use the Toolbox lies with the member states, but it can also be used to assist EU partner countries. In fact, the EU civilian CSDP mission to Moldova will encompass a counter-hybrid training and advice capacity.<sup>43</sup> The option of sending ‘stand-alone’ EU Hybrid Response Teams also exists.

The downside of the EU’s approach is that cross-sectoral coordination is required for a comprehensive response, which might be difficult and consumes a great deal of time. Focusing on specific tools, best suited for the hybrid threat that occurs, might be the best way forward.<sup>44</sup> The EU Hybrid Fusion Cell plays a central role in situational awareness which provides the basis for opting for the use of the appropriate tools. Another problem is the existence of different views among EU member states on the ambitions with regard to the development of the Hybrid Toolbox.<sup>45</sup>

The JEF could be important for the EU in a hybrid conflict situation, in particular with regard to providing information for the EU’s situational awareness. Information could be shared with the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, either directly or via the EU Military Staff, by the EU member states in the JEF and the lessons learned from exercises could also be shared. Vice versa, the EU could feed the JEF with its own information and experiences. Unfortunately, there is an important stumbling block: Brexit. Up until now, the JEF’s Lead Nation has made no arrangements with the EU in the context of security and defence. These are a prerequisite for cooperation and as long as London is not taking any initiative in this regard, the JEF’s cooperation with the EU will remain a dead letter. The UK Government led by Prime Minister Sunak might seek a practical solution for British cooperation with the EU in security and defence matters. In the near

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42 Information from interviews.

43 Aurelie Pugnet, *Europe is considering a civilian CSDP mission in Moldova - The main options*, Bruxelles 2, 8 February 2023.

44 Information from interviews.

45 Kenneth Lasoen, [Realising the EU Hybrid Toolbox: opportunities and pitfalls](#), Clingendael Policy Brief, December 2022.

term, an informal dialogue between the JEF and the EU institutions is perfectly possible and should be pursued as knowledge about the EU and its role in the hybrid domain is more or less absent at the JEF Headquarters.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Information from interviews.

# 3 The JEF in the hybrid domain

As stated in the first chapter, hybrid threats occur almost daily but, in the case of conflict, will become more targeted and tailor-made. The JEF's role in such a situation is to contribute to a wider set of responses by multiple actors at the national and international level. To bring order to this complicated landscape, the first section of this chapter lists the potential functions of the JEF in the hybrid domain without being exhaustive. The second section provides action points that the JEF should undertake to implement those functions.

## JEF functions

### The gap filler

In NATO, unanimity in the NAC is required to deploy forces.<sup>47</sup> In a crisis, short of an open armed attack that falls within the scope of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, a quick unanimous decision to deploy Allied forces is unlikely to be taken. Although Article 5 could also be activated in response to a hybrid attack<sup>48</sup>, decision-making in the NAC on reactive military measures might even prove more cumbersome. Some PNs call this the 'long NAC scenario'. In those situations, the JEF could act as a *gap filler*, because its deployment requires primarily a decision by the UK and those JEF partners that would want to join on that occasion. Others have labelled this as providing 'reassurance'.<sup>49</sup> Such a deployment serves both the aim of deterring and responding to the crisis: it is a signal to the opponent that there is awareness about the threat and a willingness to act. It is essential that the JEF (the Lead Nation) keeps NATO informed throughout the planning and conduct of the JEF's deployment, also to ensure a smooth transitioning to the Alliance's command in case of the activation of Article 5. For that purpose, it is important that JEF and NATO operational contingency plans are closely coordinated. Being a 'gap filler', the JEF should not be regarded

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47 With the exception of the NATO Response Force (or its future successor) that can be deployed by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). However, a large group of member states will have to agree 'de facto' as part of their forces – when taking part in the NRF composition at hand – has to be deployed as a result of a command decision by SACEUR.

48 See also: NATO, [Warsaw Summit Communiqué](#), paragraph 72, 8-9 July 2016.

49 The terms 'gap filler' and 'reassurance' were mentioned by interviewees.

as offering comparable security to what NATO does. Rather, the gap-filling function can be described as the 'prepositioning' of a first responder force before NATO takes over.<sup>50</sup> The development of the new NATO New Force Model with more regional focus could be a good anchor point for the JEF to develop contingency plans in concert with NATO. On the basis of a request by a JEF Nation, the JEF could set the right regional preconditions more quickly as long as SACEUR is (in)formally consulted to avoid the risk of an undesired escalatory effect.

### **Regional focus**

Contrary to the NATO Response Force (NRF), the JEF is focused on one specific area: Northern Europe, including the High North, the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea region. Although these three areas have their distinctive features, instability in one of them is likely to have a profound effect on the other two. The geographical orientation of the JEF has advantages for selecting and earmarking the required forces, but it also brings benefits in the hybrid realm. The specific characteristics of these areas – topography, demographic characteristics, infrastructure and, last but not least, the existing policies and arrangements of the countries concerned – can be used for JEF activities, be it conceptual work or for putting practical tools in place, such as liaison with non-military actors. Maintaining this regional focus on Northern Europe “provides a natural incentive for its member states to cooperate and pursue a cohesive approach and common identity.”<sup>51</sup> The JEF's regional focus on Northern Europe also fits well with the Alliance's intention for a more regionally structured force posture.

### **Situational awareness**

A direct pay-off of the regional focus is situational awareness and understanding. Naturally, the countries in Northern Europe have the best knowledge on the region and will therefore also be able to deliver the required information, insight and analysis on hybrid threats that are specifically targeted at one or more of them. The total defence concepts of the Scandinavian countries may help to have a more accurate situational awareness picture than solely based on military intelligence-gathering and analysis. Creating situational awareness is

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50 Information from interviews.

51 Sean Monaghan & Ed Arnold, '[Indispensable – NATO's Framework Nation Concept beyond Madrid](#)', *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 27 June 2022, pp. 5-6.

the starting point for building the overall picture of how threats are interlinked, how the response options should look like and what action might be needed, both regionally and thematically.<sup>52</sup>

### **Intelligence-sharing**

Sharing intelligence between countries is a quid-pro-quo business, based on trust and experience. The JEF Nations have long-established relationships. This applies in particular to the Scandinavian countries, which are already working closely together on defence matters in the NORDEF format. The Netherlands and the UK both have historic ties with the region, including in the military sense (such as cold weather training by British and Dutch marines in northern Norway). The Baltic States have a shorter record of cooperation – after their re-established independence in the nineties – but have caught up at remarkable speed. The troop contributions to the enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States by the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries and the UK have also resulted in close military ties between these troop contributors and the Baltic States. Thus, there is a trusted environment for detailed intelligence-sharing in the JEF-cooperation model.

### **Cyber and space**

Two particular areas for deepening defence cooperation in the JEF context are cyber and space. Although these topics are high on the EU and NATO agendas, there is scope for regional arrangements as well. First, cyber defence is key to the JEF's own functioning with its regional focus. Second, cyber defence cooperation between armed forces and non-military actors is more promising among the smaller group of JEF Nations than on a larger scale because the complexity becomes even greater in that case. Third, the offensive cyber capabilities of states are unlikely to be used in the context of the EU and NATO due to political and legal restrictions. They might be used in the JEF context or, at least, there is a better chance of their use – assuming there is a need and consensus to act in such a manner. After cyber, space has already been designated as a new military domain. The JEF context could serve as a catalyst for the common acquisition of commercially available space-based imagery and investing in related capabilities.

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52 As suggested by interviewees.



## **Whole-of-Government/Whole-of-Society Approach**

National authorities and international organisations such as the EU and NATO are struggling with the complexity of connecting defence/military actors to non-military actors – the Whole-of-Government(WoG)/Whole-of-Society(WoS) approach. As stated in chapter 1, bureaucratic stove-piping and cultural resistance create stumbling blocks, which are hard to overcome. As a multinational coalition of like-minded nations, the JEF can act as a catalyst in developing military to non-military connectivity in the hybrid domain. This should not only apply to the governmental actors, but also to the private sector, including leading companies responsible for the provision of energy and key infrastructure. Practical experience with JEF exercises could be shared with other nations and brought to the table in NATO and the EU.

## **Legal issues**

As legal mandates are often lacking for a military role in hybrid response activities, this topic has to be addressed in order to improve coordination with non-military actors and to allow the military to play their appropriate role. JEF Nations should exchange information on their national situation and share experiences and best practices in order to explore the potential for coordinated initiatives to address the issue of legislation. Naturally, all countries will remain responsible for their own legal arrangements, but it might help to learn how each of them deals with the challenges posed by legislation to be better prepared for situations of the JEF being tasked to conduct activities in response to hybrid threats. Once this exercise has produced results, the JEF Nations could bring the matter to the EU and NATO as input for discussions with all their member states. After all, when addressing the contribution of military EU and NATO activities in the grey conflict zone, the same legislation problems will arise.

## **Protection of sea-based energy and seabed cables**

From the start, the JEF has had a strong naval component, although in recent years land and air capabilities have taken a more prominent place. Sea-based energy infrastructure (gas and oil rigs; offshore wind farms and their relay stations) and seabed cables (including for digital traffic) are vulnerable to sabotage and interference as practice has already shown (the Nord Stream cable; the Russian naval presence above underwater cables in the North Sea). The JEF could provide the framework for close cooperation between the activities of the JEF countries in this area by exchanging information and coordinating the availability of required capabilities as a key contribution to NATO's wider efforts. The JEF could also serve as the frontrunner for establishing

the necessary connections to non-military governmental and private actors in this field. In the absence of NATO forces to deter threats to sea-based energy and seabed cables, JEF naval assets could carry out the task.

## **JEF action points**

### **The JEF Nations**

The JEF Nations deliver the military building blocks for the JEF. In the same vein, they are the key players in connecting the JEF to non-military actors in case of hybrid conflict situations. Therefore, in the JEF context, the national efforts of the JEF Nations for WoG/WoS connectivity should be shared and updated systematically. Priority has to be given to the most likely areas and countries of JEF deployment. JEF Nations can learn from each other in order to optimise their national approaches as well as to harmonise their in-country WoG/WoS arrangements to the maximum extent possible. The existing network of national JEF Points of Contacts should be expanded to encompass WoG/WoS experts within their respective countries. Logically, JEF Headquarters should be informed about these national WoG/WoS networks. National liaison officers at JEF Headquarters continue to provide the link to the national authorities, also for hybrid matters.

### **Inventory of key WoG/WoS actors**

In order to support a smooth interaction between the JEF Nations and the JEF Headquarters, an inventory of WoG/WoS actors should be developed. Such an inventory has to encompass both the governmental actors – at national, regional and local levels – as well as key private businesses in sectors that are potential targets for hybrid activities such as the energy, water management and ICT sectors. The inventory should be a living document, to be regularly checked and updated by the JEF Nations' experts. JEF Nations should share their national lists with the JEF Headquarters and provide updates as required. The *Inventory of key WoG/WoS actors* will offer the JEF a guide to non-military actors in all countries which will speed up coordination and harmonise response actions in case a hybrid attack occurs in one of the JEF Nations and the JEF is called to assist in addressing the attack. National liaison officers at the JEF Headquarters could act as a point of contact with their national non-military actors. During JEF exercises, the inventory can be tested and should be adapted if required, based on the lessons learned.

## **Legal issues**

A group of legal experts could be constituted in the JEF Nations' network. The network should be used to exchange information on national legislation. The first issue to be discussed should be the national laws and rules for information-gathering, information analysis and information-sharing. The JEF Nations' legal experts could even start to explore a set of principles and guidelines in this area. In a coordinated fashion the Ministries of Defence of the JEF Nations should investigate the potential for amending national legislation if this were to be required.

## **Non-military experts at JEF Headquarters**

Another measure to improve the JEF's preparedness for acting in the hybrid domain would be to incorporate non-military experts at the JEF Headquarters in Northwood, such as cyber specialists, police and law enforcement officers, and critical infrastructure experts. Such a next step would build on the work conducted by the 'JEF Combined Interagency Task Force', which has already brought military and non-military experts of the JEF Nations together.<sup>53</sup> At the JEF Headquarters, these civilian experts could assist in and provide advice on writing concepts, doctrine and exercise scenarios for the JEF's hybrid response functions. They could remain at the headquarters on a temporary basis with the choice of expertise connected to the needs of the JEF Headquarters staff. Expertise in the transport, energy and other key infrastructure areas should be high on the list. These civilian experts would not have an operational function. The national military liaison officers would remain responsible for linking up with their national authorities who would provide the connectivity to non-military actors in capitals.

## **The Ministerial and Leaders' Meetings**

The war in Ukraine has been the trigger for stepping up JEF meetings at the political level. The JEF Defence Ministerial Meetings increased from two in 2021 to three 2022. Furthermore, on three occasions Leaders' Meetings at the level of prime ministers have taken place in the same year.<sup>54</sup> Statements released after such gatherings have signalled to potential adversaries, first and foremost Russia, not only solidarity with Ukraine and a continued willingness to support

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53 Information from interviews.

54 Some of the meetings were digital, others were 'live' meetings of Ministers of Defence or Prime Ministers.

the country but also the determination of the JEF Nations to deploy the JEF, if required, in order to protect their security against Russian threats. Strategic communication is a major task for the leaders' format to counter hybrid threats by political signalling. These 'strategic messages' should preferably go hand in hand with concrete measures taken by the JEF Nations, including by non-military actors to signal WoG/WoS involvement. The JEF context could be used to improve cross-governmental cooperation in the hybrid domain, also by involving other ministers in meetings or table-top exercises as required. JEF deployment decisions should be accompanied by such strategic communication to deter and counter the hybrid threat activity.

### **Explaining the JEF**

The risks connected to existing misperceptions about the role of the JEF, including in the hybrid domain, in other NATO countries require a strategic communication initiative of 'explaining the JEF'. The UK as the lead nation has to play the central role, supported by the other PNs. Such a strategic communication initiative could encompass the composition of a clear narrative on the JEF's role and its potential link to NATO. Briefings in various NATO (and EU) meetings should serve the same purpose. Another option would be to invite Defence Policy Directors and, later on, even the political leaders of other Allied countries to JEF meetings.

## 4 Conclusions and recommendations

In 2014, the Joint Expeditionary Force was established by the Lead Nation (the UK) in the context of NATO's Framework Nations Concept. Since then, it has developed into a flexible multinational military formation for first responder or initial-entry operations. All JEF Nations are located in the northern part of Europe. The regional focus of the JEF is one of its important advantages in terms of shared strategic interests, knowledge, experience, and operational capabilities. This will suit the new NATO New Force Model as regionalisation will become an important element of the adapted deterrence and defence posture of the Alliance. The approaching NATO membership of Finland and Sweden, both JEF Participating Nations (PNs), will not change the purpose or deployment options of the JEF. On the contrary, it makes the elaboration of the connectivity between the JEF and NATO's collective defence plans easier.

On the other hand, the JEF offers a great deal of flexibility in terms of decision-making and deployment, as it is not dependent on the unanimity of all thirty NATO Allies. In particular in grey zone conflict situations – below the level of armed warfare – this can be a virtue. The JEF can be considered as a gap filler, sending a signal of military solidarity with the country or countries targeted by hybrid means. The Leaders' and Ministerial Meetings of the JEF Nations also serve that purpose: in the first year of the war in Ukraine, statements and press interviews by political leaders have sent strong messages of solidarity and unity. Strategic communication by the JEF towards other NATO Allies should be improved in order to counter and prevent a misunderstanding and misperception of the JEF's role and functions.

The priority given to the JEF's role in the hybrid domain has turned out to be a formidable challenge. The most important problem seems to be that JEF Nations have diverging views on the added value and importance of the JEF role in contributing to countering hybrid threats. The closer PNs are located to Russia, the more they underline the key role of the JEF as a military first responder force. Another major challenge is how the JEF should interact with non-military actors that have the primary responsibility in addressing hybrid threats which are targeted, for example, against energy infrastructure, governmental institutions

or private companies. Therefore, the issue is to define more precisely what the JEF's role or, better, its functions could be in support of the leading actors in the Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society approaches, also with regard to the roles of NATO and the EU in the hybrid domain. A key area in which the JEF can play an important role is information and intelligence-sharing in order to optimise situational awareness on the character and nature of the hybrid threats at hand. The legal obstacles that come into play for the military having an information-gathering function need to be addressed by the PNs themselves, but in close coordination with each other. Sharing their national provisions might help to explore options for what the military will be allowed to do in situations below the threshold of warfare.

The Nord Stream incident and the Russian presence in the North Sea to explore locations of underwater cables have resulted in a new NATO priority, that is the protection of energy and communications infrastructure at sea. The JEF could play a supportive role, for example by acting as the lead formation on rotation with NATO's Standing Naval Forces, either in the North Sea or Baltic Sea areas.

## Recommendations

In order to strengthen the role of the JEF in the hybrid domain, all JEF Nations have an important responsibility. As previously stated, they have to closely engage with one another on many aspects of countering hybrid threats. This also applies to the Netherlands. Considering the available expertise in the Netherlands, the country could promote the following action points, also in order to improve its own expertise in the area of its armed forces' role in countering hybrid threats:

1. Propose the development of a **JEF mission statement on its role and functions in the hybrid domain** in order to prevent misunderstanding, to recognise the primary role of non-military actors and to clarify what the JEF's contribution can be.
2. Propose the **exchange of Whole-of-Government (WoG) and Whole-of-Society (WoS) structures and arrangements** in the JEF Nations in order to increase mutual understanding and to learn from each other's experiences.
3. Use this information-exchange as input for **developing an Inventory of WoG/ WoS actors in the JEF Nations** that can assist JEF planners and national liaison officers at JEF Headquarters.

4. Explore options for the **temporary presence of civilian experts at JEF Headquarters** in order to increase knowledge of other WoG/WoS actors and to contribute to the planning of exercises and other activities.
5. **Suggest connecting the JEF's agenda more closely to NATO**, not only for synchronising military operational plans, but also to set up channels for sharing information when the JEF has to play an active role in hybrid conflict situations.
6. Aim for a **structural dialogue between the JEF and the EU** for a better understanding of the role of both actors in the hybrid domain.
7. Promote **better strategic communication on the JEF's role and functions** in the hybrid domain in order to create a better understanding of the JEF's added value by other NATO countries.
8. Together with other JEF Nations, explore the scope for exchanging information and for adjusting **national legislation and rules** that restrict the **role of the military in gathering and sharing information** in peacetime and grey zone conflict situations.