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NATO and Russia: Spiral of distrust

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There has been much discussion as to whether NATO's current forward deployment and pattern of exercises in the east along Russia's borders are sufficient to 'deter Russia', but very little discussion about what effect these efforts have. In this chapter we examine how NATO's recent preoccupation with deterrence has been received by Russia and what consequences this may have for future relations between the two actors.

The crises in Ukraine, Russia's use of military power and the annexation of Crimea triggered a new dynamic. Dormant historical perceptions of the other as 'aggressive and expansionist' were reinforced, pre-existing narratives on the sources of the crisis were exacerbated and spurred a reliance on deterrence as the core strategy on both sides. While NATO's increasing military presence on its eastern flank is not very impressive in numerical terms, Russia has reacted by taking measures to counter this new challenge. In the Russian view, NATO still enjoys a clear conventional advantage at the aggregate level, and any build-up closer to Russia's borders by an 'aggressive and expansionist' NATO must be met by increased deterrence. At the same time, the fact that Russia currently lacks the military strength for strategic offensive attacks against NATO countries seems to be unimportant in NATO's reasoning (Golts 2016). Russian leaders underline that Russia has neither the military capability nor political, economic or real ideological interests in launching a strategic offensive against the West, and have repeatedly held that the measures taken are of a purely

defensive character (Putin 2016b; RT 2016a). However, such claims do not seem credible to Western military planners, who perceive Russia as an ‘aggressive and expansionist’ power.

We begin by examining the sources of Russian reactions to NATO’s deterrence efforts, emphasizing that Russia’s rejection of the West has been long in the making. We then ask what effects the new and mutual pattern of deterrence has. Finally, we argue that it is unlikely that this pattern can be broken in the current situation characterized by very high levels of distrust.

NATO and Russia: a quick backgrounder

According to Ted Hopf (2009) Russian political identity – and thus Russian attitudes towards cooperation with the West, including NATO – has changed dramatically since the fall of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s the Russian elite identified closely with the West and sought to make Russia into a liberal democratic market economy. At that time NATO was viewed as a potential strategic partner by Russian decision-makers. Ten years later, Russia no longer defined itself in terms of Western or Eurasian ‘Others’, but was seeking to restore its own ‘natural’ identity. The key elements of this identity were a strong and centralized authoritative state in Moscow, social protection for the population, secure sovereign borders, and engagement with Western hegemony on a strictly selective basis. By 2009, according to Hopf (2009: 4–5) Russia saw itself as a ‘semi-peripheral player in the world capitalist economy, existentially secure behind its nuclear arsenal, and a possessor of enormous natural resources’. Russia had become a deliberately self-limiting participant in the perpetuation of the system. However, potential frictions could make Russia reconsider its policy of withdrawal from the

Western hegemony; in particular, Hopf identified Western efforts at regime change or NATO membership on Russia's borders as potential triggers of change.

The changes in Russian thinking about Russia's place in the global system and hence the course of Russian policies were to a certain extent triggered by Western actions. While NATO expansion (in 1999, 2004, 2009) is considered the most important strategic challenge, the list of Russian grievances is a long one. It includes NATO's war against Yugoslavia and support for independence of Kosovo in 1999, the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 and the building of a ballistic missile defence system, the war in Iraq in 2003, Western support for the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, NATO's announcement of plans to offer membership to Ukraine and Georgia in 2008, and the Arab Spring events, in particular operations against the Libyan regime in 2011.¹

The point here is not whether or not Russia's version of these events is correct, but that such perceptions of growing Western unilateralism in world affairs and disregard of Russia's interests in what Moscow sees as its 'legitimate sphere of interest' are reinforced by these events. The fact that the Russian leadership has been nurturing such perceptions through official rhetoric over the years and that they have deep resonance in Russian society, make them even more defining. Together with new ideas about Russia's role in the world, these perceptions of Western animosity have a massive impact not only on Russian thinking about NATO and cooperation with the Alliance, but also on the political practices that Russia pursues in the field of security.

In addition to changing views on the West and NATO, Russia has experienced a period of positive economic development. Relatively high prices for energy commodities have

generated huge revenues that have made it possible for Russia to embark on an ambitious programme of rearmament (Adomeit 2015). The 2008 conflict with Georgia had revealed sizeable deficiencies in Russian military structures. These deficiencies were at least partly addressed in the period between 2008 and 2014, and Russia has now developed much more modern and efficient military muscle.

By the onset of the crises in Ukraine, Moscow therefore had not only an ideological motivation to prevent what the political elite projected as a Western incursion into Russia's zone of exclusive strategic interests. It also had the technical capability to do so in a more efficient manner than during the 2008 conflict with Georgia. In 2014, both Ukrainian authorities and the West were taken aback when Russia acted swiftly and efficiently in Crimea and in the eastern part of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin proudly announced the annexation of Crimea and praised Russian military for what they had managed to achieve.

But Russian actions in Ukraine also had several unintended consequences. The most important of these was the emerging internal cohesion in NATO and the EU, and more – rather than less – NATO and US forward strategic presence in Europe. In addition, Russia's actions pushed Ukraine and Georgia more firmly toward the European Union and NATO, and triggered Western sanctions against Russia. Thus, it may seem that Russia won the battle for Crimea, but suffered a strategic defeat in what Moscow interprets as an ongoing and existential conflict with the West.

NATO and Russia: new dynamics after 2014

While cooperation and mutual understanding between NATO and Russia had been difficult for years, in particular after the 2008 war in Georgia, the crises in and over Ukraine brought relations to an all-time low since the end of the Cold War. In Russia, the claim that Western powers were aiming to encircle the country and undermine its sovereignty through NATO expansion and the instigation of ‘colour revolutions’ had gained increasing currency following the wave of protests on the eve and in the wake of the 2011 State Duma elections. Moscow interpreted these events as a new Western attempt at regime change in Russia – a failed Russian colour revolution inspired and supported by the West (Duncan 2012; Zygar 2015: 75–76).² Even the EU neighbourhood policy came to be seen as a tool for promoting the expansionist Western agenda, particularly in light of Russia’s own ambitions of creating a Eurasian Union (Rieker and Gjerde 2016). These distrustful perceptions of the West and NATO made up the most important frame of reference on the Russian side when the crises in Ukraine began.

A quick run-through of interpretations of core events during the Ukraine crises shows just how juxtaposed Russian and NATO views became. While NATO countries presented the EU–Ukraine agreement that President Yanukovich refused to sign in autumn 2013 (and which triggered the Maidan uprising) merely as a trade agreement, Russia saw it as an attempt to bind Ukraine into the Western sphere. While NATO represented the Maidan events as a just and democratic uprising against a corrupt and undemocratic regime, as a Revolution of Dignity, Russia saw the subversive hand of the West. The new Yatsenyuk government formed in February 2014 was legitimate according to the NATO script, but according to the Russians, it was ‘fascist’ and the result of an unconstitutional coup. And while NATO saw Russia’s annexation of Crimea as a blatant and unprecedented breach of international law that confirmed Russia’s expansionist agenda (Burke-White 2014; Yost 2015), Russia represented

it as a historically legitimate ‘re-unification’ based on the will of the people of Crimea. Further, while NATO saw the subversive hand of Russia in the armed uprising in Eastern Ukraine, Russia represented it as a justified response to Kiev’s new anti-Russian policies and the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) launched by Kiev and supported by NATO (Saunders 2014; Valdai Discussion Club 2014).

The interactions in and over Ukraine for NATO–Russia relations result in mutual and escalating convictions of the other party’s assertive, aggressive and expansionist ambitions. Accordingly, both sides initially adopted disengagement and deterrence as their principal strategies, and with reference to a similar logic. Western policy-makers concluded that ‘we were not clear enough on Georgia, that’s why they moved on Ukraine’ (Liik 2015: 1). Such reasoning implies an understanding that Russia, if it is not deterred, will necessarily pursue pre-planned strategic designs on areas beyond its own borders, even on NATO territory. For his part, Putin (2014) put it like this: ‘Back then, we realized that the more ground we give and the more excuses we make, the more our opponents become brazen and the more cynical and aggressive their demeanour becomes.’ In other words, Putin held that Russia should have embarked on a policy of containment and deterrence earlier, and that this could have prevented the crisis from erupting. In any event, that was the understanding which came to guide Russian policies following the crises in Ukraine.

Disengagement and deterrence

From 2014 onward, disengagement and deterrence policies materialized swiftly, on both sides and across the military and geographic spectrum. On the Russian side, the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea was immediately strengthened, with reference to ‘NATO’s build-up of forces in the

Eastern Europe and the Black Sea' (RT 2014). Moreover, a series of snap military exercises, which according to the Vienna Document would not need to be announced in advance, were undertaken close to NATO borders. Also snap inspections of much larger troop contingents increased. In 2015 alone Russia conducted 5 000 exercises (Interfax 2015). There was greater Russian naval activity in the Baltic, the Black and in the Mediterranean seas and a rising number of incidents of Russian aircraft violating Baltic airspace (Aid 2014; Jones and Milne 2014; Milne 2014). Also in other regions, indeed in all directions, Russian military air activity was stepped up in an effort to show strength and to deter.

While the role of nuclear weapons had been downplayed since the end of the Cold War and until the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, they soon acquired new relevance in NATO–Russia relations. Over the past fifteen years, Russia has modernized its strategic deterrent and developed a strategy of 'escalating to de-escalate' through strategic conventional and, if necessary, nuclear strikes (Bruusgaard 2016; Colby 2016). Already in April 2014 it was rumoured that a squadron of Tupolev Tu-22M3 long-range bombers would be moved to the Crimean Peninsula; this move was openly announced in 2015 (BBC News 2015b). The rhetorical emphasis on Russia's nuclear deterrent seemed to be increasing.³

In tune with Moscow's build-up of forces, changing patterns of exercises and increasing military posturing, the new Russian Military Doctrine adopted in December 2014 described NATO's military build-up near the Russian borders as the country's 'main external military risk'.⁴ In December 2015 a new National Security Strategy was presented: here NATO was mentioned four times as a source of threat to national security. Russia was especially negative towards 'the alliance's increased military activity and the approach of its military infrastructure toward Russia's borders, the building of a missile-defence system, and attempts

to endow the bloc with global functions executed in violation of the provisions of international law' (President of the Russian Federation 2015). In the same document it is clearly stated that a system of European security based on a bloc approach (the EU and NATO) is not viable. Instead Russia is 'prepared to develop relations with NATO based on equality for the purpose of strengthening general security in the Euro-Atlantic region' (President of the Russian Federation 2015).

Especially when viewed in the highly distrustful perspective of NATO countries following the annexation of Crimea, these Russian policies and activities were repeatedly taken as proof of Russia's aggressive and *offensive* strategic agenda. Russian claims that all its actions were *defensive* simply did not appear credible. The generally distrustful view of Russia spilled over onto NATO countries' interpretations of Russia in other areas of international politics as well. Russia's framing of the military engagement in Syria from September 2015 onward as fighting 'international terrorism' was generally not accepted by NATO countries, and they rejected what Putin (at the UN in 2015) claimed was as an invitation to cooperate in this common fight. Instead, they saw the Russian campaign as a move to prop up the Assad regime against the moderate opposition in Syria, which NATO was seeking to support (BBC 2016).

The Janus face of internal reassurance

From the actions, reactions and interactions between Russia and NATO in the first few years following the annexation of Crimea it seems reasonable to conclude that the dangerous gulf that developed between them was exacerbated by the intense preoccupation of both sides not only with deterrence but also with internal reassurance. NATO initially made considerable

efforts to reassure frontline countries and secure internal cohesion in the Alliance. However, scant attention has been paid to the evolution of relations with Russia, not least the question of how to reassure Russia and avoid incidents that could lead to a serious crisis.

In Russia, the main concern of the leadership, apart from deterring NATO, has been to reassure the audiences at home that this time Russia will not stand down in the face of ‘the Western threat’ (Putin 2016a). Any cooperative engagement with NATO has been construed as dangerous, and actors who propose such policies have been branded ‘fifth columnists’ (Lipman 2015). More generally, the tense relations with the West have been used as means of strengthening internal cohesion in Russia and rallying support for the regime. The State Duma elections on 18 September 2016 showed that this strategy brings results – Putin’s party of power, United Russia, won the constitutional majority in the State Duma, and none of the liberal parties managed to get the 5% support needed for representation in the lower house of the Russian parliament.

There are two obvious and serious consequences of mutual and exclusive reliance on deterrence driven by a need for internal reassurance. First, there is neglect of the need to communicate directly to the adversary that your intentions are not offensive, in a situation where this adversary is convinced that they are precisely that. Second, direct lines of communication and crises prevention mechanisms are not established, precisely when they are most needed.

And indeed a series of problematic incidents did occur in the wake of the hasty implementation of mutual deterrence and internal reassurance strategies. Already in November 2014 the European Leadership Network (ELN 2014) documented details of nearly

40 specific incidents that had occurred since that April, noting that ‘the intensity and gravity of incidents involving Russian and Western militaries and security agencies visibly increased.’ The ELN updated its report in March 2015 because the pattern of incidents was continuing, bringing the number of incidents to an overall total of 66 (ELN 2015).

Spurred by rising concerns in the expert community and among certain NATO members that a one-sided policy of disengagement and deterrence would be conflict-escalating, at the Munich Conference in February 2016 NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg disclosed that the Alliance was developing a combined response of ‘deterrence and dialogue’ (Stoltenberg 2016a).⁵ The updating of mutual inspection regimes and reporting of military exercises as well as renewed engagement in the NATO–Russia Council were proposed as specific mechanisms. The continued Russian engagement in Syria, and crucially the renewed efforts to bring about negotiations between President Assad and the opposition, probably also contributed to push some kind of re–engagement with Russia onto the NATO agenda. This development makes clear the potential significance of cooperation with Russia on other issues than European security and in other theatres, as a means of moving relations away from the brink.

Also Russia has expressed concern about the risks implied by the new situation. After a meeting between Stoltenberg and Lavrov on 12 February 2016, it was agreed to explore the possibility for convening a meeting of the NATO–Russia Council. A meeting on the ambassadorial level was subsequently held on 20 April 2016, but brought meagre results. While Stoltenberg (2016b) underlined that the meeting did not ‘mean that we are back to business as usual ...’, Russian ambassador to NATO Aleksander Grushko (2016) indicated that developing confidence-building measures between NATO and Russia would be

impossible as long as NATO continued its build-up on the Russian border. A dual-track policy of ‘deterrence and dialogue’ could not succeed as long as both sides continued to carry out and increase their deterrence activities at full speed. When perceptions of the other side’s aggressive and expansionist intentions are so intense to begin with, any increase in deterrence activities alongside a dialogue initiative will merely confirm suspicions that dialogue initiatives are smokescreens. This is likely to have been the effect of deterrence activities such as Russian fighter jets ‘buzzing’ the US guided-missile destroyer *SS Donald Cook* in the Baltic on 11 April 2016, the continued build-up of Russian capabilities in the Black Sea, the activation of one segment of its missile defence system in Romania on 10 May 2016, and the initiation of another one in Poland a week later, as well as the Anaconda military exercise which gathered 31 000 NATO soldiers in Poland in June 2016 in the run-up to the Warsaw Summit. Therefore, when Stoltenberg proposed a new meeting of the NATO–Russia Council prior to the Warsaw Summit, President Putin’s spokesman Dmitri Peskov (2016) bluntly responded that such a meeting was unlikely to bring greater understanding, given the level of mutual distrust.

The Warsaw Summit and Russian reactions

Although physically not present, Russia was very much in evidence at the Warsaw Summit. The Warsaw Summit Communiqué (2016), with its many references to Russia, Ukraine and deterrence (see Table 1), is a good illustration of this Russian presence.

Table 1. Some key issues noted in the final communiqué of the NATO Warsaw Summit and their frequencies in the text

<FIGURE 8.1 HERE>

The core post-Warsaw NATO narrative on Russia has been consistent, with stress on Russia's continued aggressive and destabilizing actions, also in Syria. While the Communiqué confirmed NATO's openness to 'political dialogue with Russia', the main emphasis was on establishing mechanisms to avoid miscalculations, and unintended escalation in this regard. The text indicated that it would be up to Russia to deliver, if these mechanisms were to work. Moreover, the Communiqué declared that a partnership with Russia was not currently possible, because Russia 'had not changed its course' despite 'repeated calls by the Alliance'. Such reasoning indicates a belief in NATO that increasing deterrence combined with calls on Russia to change behaviour will eventually work.

This chapter and the story we have tried to tell indicates that this is *not* what is happening, probably because Moscow is expecting that its constant calls on NATO to stop advancing closer to Russia's borders, combined with Russia's increasing deterrence activities, will make *NATO* change its course. Russian reactions to the Warsaw Summit testify to this logic. The Warsaw Communiqué put responsibility for the deteriorating relations on Russia, whereas Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov (2016), commenting on the Warsaw Summit, put the responsibility on NATO. Aleksander Grushko, Russian ambassador to NATO, stated that the planned deployments on the eastern flank were 'not justified' and 'excessive' and accused NATO of fomenting a Cold War atmosphere, adding that Russia would have to react to the deployment of forces in its former Soviet backyard (EurActiv 2016). As a step in this direction, Russia has either deployed or plans to deploy military installations that will limit NATO's ability to operate along its borders (Weinberger 2016; Sputnik 2016). While a second meeting in the NATO–Russia Council did take place on 13 July 2016, and actually

included a discussion on raising air safety in the Baltic Sea based on a Russian proposal, Stoltenberg concluded afterwards that there had not been a ‘meeting of minds today’ (EurActiv 2016).

Even if several analysts have noted that Russia’s reactions after Warsaw have been cautious (see DIIS Policy Brief 2016), core perceptions of NATO’s animosity toward Russia have been reinforced. As Fyodor Lukyanov, one of Russia’s key experts, put it:

After a long quest for a new mission, when NATO tested different roles from global world policemen and expeditionary super-unit to soft security provider and democracy promoter, the organization is back to its habitual business: to contain Russia.

(Lukyanov 2016)

With such views of NATO, the pattern of Russian deterrence activities has continued.

Between 5 and 10 September 2016, the Kavkaz 2016 military strategic exercise was held, centred on Crimea and involving 12,500 troops. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu explained that the comprehensive exercise was needed to defend the country against an increasing military threat, and the media noted that the exercise seemed to transform Russia into one mobilized national military machine (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2016). Moreover, the small steps advanced over the past year, aimed at creating external reassurance, do not seem to be succeeding. Military diplomatic staff from NATO countries were invited to visit and inspect the Kavkaz 2016 exercise – but they rejected the invitation, on the grounds that it would mean visiting Crimea, an act that would seem to endorse the Russian annexation (Eurasia Daily Monitor 2016).

Future perspectives

The heavy focus on deterrence, and indeed the widespread conviction on both sides of the NATO–Russia divide that a new ‘big war’ might be in the offing, has empowered certain voices and milieus. On the Russian side such circles have become very vocal. The need to withstand NATO/ US aggression was a recurrent theme in election debates on foreign policy. Indeed, the consensus among the four parties represented in the new Duma rests largely on this idea and the common appraisal of Russian policies in Ukraine and Syria as a success. And some public-opinion polls indicate that almost one-third of Russians surveyed fear that NATO or US aggression against Russian territory could become a reality (Levada 2015).

A crucial question for the future of Russia–NATO relations is how vocal and decisive these circles will be and whether actors capable of seeing farther than issues of immediate military capabilities and deterrence will be able to influence the policy-making process. Although the results of the State Duma elections are not encouraging, there are some signs that Russian policy-making circles realize the need for a new set of initiatives for coordination and cooperation to avoid dangerous incidents and crises. Further, the realization is growing in Russia that the economic crisis will eventually have implications for the country’s capacity to embark on an arms race and confrontation with the West. This may have a sobering effect on decision- and policy-making circles in Russia.

Future NATO–Russia relations will depend not only on developments within Russia, but also on what NATO does. Initiatives to open new communication channels and implement confidence-building measures are promising, but may stumble because all of NATO’s 28

member-states must agree on future policies towards Russia. Some governments seem to be more interested in NATO continuing its tough line towards Russia, than in finding ways out of the current crisis in relations.

In a broader perspective, any moves toward expanding NATO partnerships and cooperation further east seem set to trigger harsh Russian reactions. Most crucially, any future decision to supply weapons to Kiev would most certainly encourage warmongers on the Russian side. Also increasing military assistance to and cooperation with Georgia and Moldova would have such an effect. In the wake of the crises in Ukraine, both Sweden and Finland strengthened their mutual cooperation with NATO and signed 'host nation support' agreements. Any prospective NATO membership for Finland will, as Putin as declared, prompt Russia 'to respond accordingly' (RT 2016b).

While interaction in the post-Soviet space and along Russia's borders will be extremely delicate in the years to come, practical cooperation elsewhere and on other issues might provide opportunities for setting relations on a less confrontational track. The recent (albeit short-lived) rapprochement between the USA and Russia on the Syrian question could signal a slightly more cooperative approach from both sides. Neither one seems capable of addressing the complex situation in the Middle East without closer cooperation or at least coordination of their efforts. For Russia, the acknowledgement by Western states that it has a role to play and legitimate interests to defend is precisely the recognition the country has been seeking. It remains to be seen whether such big-power cooperation elsewhere in the world can have positive spill-over effects and curb current levels of distrust and tension between Russia and NATO. As of today, however, we must conclude that this appears highly unlikely.

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¹ Putin reconfirmed this list of grievances in his recent and highly publicized interview with Bloomberg (Putin 2016b).

² Note that in Russian discourse the USA, NATO and the West are most often treated as synonyms.

³ President Vladimir Putin said in August 2014 that Russia's armed forces, backed by its nuclear arsenal, were ready to meet any aggression, declaring that "It's best not to mess with us." (New York Post 2014). Russia's top general, Valery Gerasimov, in February 2015 said that support for Russia's strategic nuclear forces combined with improvements in conventional forces would ensure that the United States and NATO did not gain military superiority. The Russian military would receive more than 50 new intercontinental nuclear missiles that year, according to Gerasimov (Reuters 2015)

⁴ The doctrine refers to 'build-up of the power potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and vesting NATO with global functions carried out in violation of the rules of international law, bringing the

military infrastructure of NATO member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation, including by further expansion of the alliance' available in English translation at <http://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>

⁵ The latter was necessary according to Stoltenberg in order to 'promote strategic stability', 'clarify intentions and expectations' and 'reduce the risks of incidents and accidents' and 'avoid escalation'