

Russia-NATO: Controlling Confrontation

By **Dmitri Trenin**

Dmitri Trenin is Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and author of, most recently, *Should We Fear Russia?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016.

Current hostilities between the United States, NATO and Russia, though they might not be at Cold War levels, do indicate real danger. NATO's continued expansion toward the east and the deployment of defensive American antimissiles in Europe constitute serious strategic problems for Moscow. Military reactions on both sides remain restrained. Hostilities will not disappear immediately, but renewed political dialogue could bring the situation into check.

politique étrangère

NATO's Warsaw Summit in July 2016 translated into hard military facts the consequences of the political decisions announced at the alliance's Wales Summit in September 2014, in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine. As a result, politico-military standoff has returned to Europe after a quarter-century-long "holiday period" of security cooperation ushered in by the end of the Cold War. This new-old standoff will probably last a long time, and heavily affect the security of all countries in Europe, whether members of NATO or not. The situation needs to be taken seriously, with a view to, in the first instance, managing the very real immediate risks that flow from it, and, in the second instance, looking for ways to provide stability to Europe's downgraded security situation.

The current status of US-Russian and NATO-Russian relations is often compared to the Cold War. This is misleading. The confrontation today is not nearly as fundamental as was the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1940s-1980s, with its clash of ideologies, the watertight nature of the Iron Curtain, economic quasi-isolation, and the ever-present fear of a nuclear Armageddon. Today's situation is different in many ways, but it could be as dangerous. Those who use the Cold War analogy risk looking for the things that will never happen again – and missing new ones that might happen.

Europe: a new division?

In Moscow, NATO is again seen as the main platform for US military presence in Europe and the chief instrument of Washington's political domination in that part of the world. The Kremlin roundly rejects Western references to Russia's actions in Crimea and its policies in Ukraine as the main reason for NATO's reawakening. Rather, it is the process of NATO's enlargement to the east, which began over two decades ago, that is usually seen in Russia as the central cause of the breakdown of Russian-Western security cooperation in the 1990s and 2000s. President Vladimir Putin publicly described the use of Russian military force in Crimea in 2014 as preventive action against post-Maidan Ukraine's potential accession to NATO.

The decisions formally taken in Warsaw in 2016 had been openly discussed for some time, and did not come as a surprise to Moscow, which was able to calmly analyze them. Thus, they did not produce a new crisis, in and of themselves. A total of four NATO battalions newly deployed in each of the three Baltic States, and Poland, plus a multinational brigade in Romania are a far cry from the one million-strong contingent of NATO forces long stationed in West Germany. NATO's Rapid Deployment Force, with six new command posts in the eastern NATO member states, is not an immediate threat to Russia. More frequent NATO exercises close to Russia's borders command attention, but again they do not look like a covert phase of an imminent invasion.

Yet, the division of Europe is a fact, and its consequences are real. The dividing line on the continent now passes much farther to the east than it used to. The distance from the Estonian border to St Petersburg is less than 200km. The nearest US military base, in Poland's portion of the former East Prussia, will be just 60km from the Russian border, and 135km from Kaliningrad. Russian military planners highly respect the US military's capability of transporting large forces across huge distances in short periods of time, and have to consider various contingencies. Russia's security buffer in the western strategic direction has shrunk considerably. NATO's current policy toward Russia is routinely described in Moscow as containment.

At the Warsaw Summit, NATO did not formally pull out of the 1997 Founding Act on relations with Russia, under which the West undertook a commitment not to deploy significant foreign forces, and nuclear weapons, in the territory of the new member states. If the force levels decided

in Warsaw are not substantially increased, Russia will probably not regard the NATO deployments decided in Warsaw as a major security threat. Few in Moscow will accept them as a means of reassurance of fearful Polish-Baltic allies, a sort of a “tripwire” designed to deter a Russian invasion; the Kremlin does not intend to conquer those countries and restore the Soviet empire. Rather, expanding NATO infrastructure in the former Soviet/Warsaw Pact territory, replacing former Soviet military bases there, is viewed as a means of pressuring Russia politically and challenging its security space. So far, however, the threat levels resulting from this remain tolerable; this is not a *casus belli*.

Ballistic missile defense (BMD) is a separate issue. The US decision to deploy anti-missiles in Europe, first made by President George W. Bush, and later reviewed and reconfigured by his successor Barack Obama, long preceded the Ukraine crisis. To Moscow, US BMD in Europe has always been – and remains – part of a global US ballistic missile defense architecture designed to blunt Russia’s (and China’s) nuclear deterrent. Washington’s official explanation – that the defenses in Europe were being designed to protect US NATO allies from an Iranian missile attack – were never accepted by Moscow. President Obama’s refusal to cancel the program after the signing of the landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement between the world powers and Iran in 2015 fully vindicated this assessment, in the eyes of the Kremlin.

Russian officials admit that, as originally declared, the US BMD assets would not have significant capability against Russia’s strategic nuclear forces. They point out, however, that a modification of those assets would pose a threat. Yet, the missile defense base in Romania, which became operational in 2016, and another base in Poland, to be opened in 2018, are not covered by any international agreement, and are thus off limits to Russian inspectors. Even though Russia has national technical means of monitoring the situation around the bases, there remain important uncertainties with regard to US intentions in the minds of Russia’s NATO-watchers.

Apart from the military uncertainties, there are political ones. By admitting Montenegro to the alliance, the Warsaw Summit made a point: NATO’s enlargement will continue, and Russia will have no veto over it. Having made that general point, however, NATO in Warsaw did not rush to integrate Georgia, despite its evident democratic progress; it simply noted that Tbilisi’s membership bid was still being considered. On Ukraine, the Warsaw Summit struck a different note. Kiev’s NATO membership bid was played down, and instead priority was given to NATO countries’ military assistance to Ukraine. Since Kiev considers Ukraine to

be *de facto* at war with Russia, the nature and scale of this assistance are closely monitored in Moscow.

No longer neutral politically after joining the European Union in the 1990s, Sweden and Finland have been moving closer militarily to NATO and the United States. By the time of the Warsaw Summit, a blue-ribbon committee's study was published, commissioned by the foreign ministries in Stockholm and Helsinki. The study did not contain any recommendations – whether positive or negative – on NATO accession, but the general trend in both countries was clear to see. After Ukraine, Sweden began to openly regard Russia as a potential adversary, and Finland started, for the first time since World War II, to publicly express security concerns about its “unpredictable neighbor” in the east. Should Helsinki and Stockholm decide to join NATO, however unlikely it looks in the foreseeable future, Russia will face a hostile neighborhood from the Arctic to the Baltic to the Black Sea, with the sole exception of Belarus.

In the Black Sea area, NATO has bolstered its heretofore light military presence in Romania and Bulgaria. Naval exercises, also involving NATO aspirant countries Ukraine and Georgia, have become more frequent. The US Navy's presence in the Black Sea has become semi-permanent. Although Crimea's incorporation into the Russian Federation in 2014 strengthened Moscow's hand in the region, this new position of power is now being actively contested by NATO, with the US military presence much more in evidence than before. Moscow's brief but sharp deterioration of relations with Turkey, which were not reconciled until August 2016, threatened to create a particularly tense strategic environment along Russia's south-western flank.

Moscow responded to NATO's moves even before the Warsaw Summit. It announced the deployment of three new army divisions in the Western military district; it continued the practice of snap military exercises in European Russia, which unnerved Ukraine and some of NATO's eastern flank members, and it enhanced Russia's military presence in the Kaliningrad enclave, sitting deep inside NATO's territory. Capitalizing on Kaliningrad's forward position, Russia brought its nuclear-capable *Iskander* missiles there, thus signaling to the United States and NATO that their assets in Poland could be under threat. Moscow did not receive Minsk's agreement to build a new Russian air base in Belarus. However, Russian-Belarusian military cooperation has become tighter. Belarus is now the only buffer between Russian territory and NATO countries. Although formally allied to Russia, Belarus seeks to stay away from the deepening confrontation between Moscow and the West, and even manages to profit from the sanctions regime imposed by the United States and the European Union

countries on Russia, as well as Moscow's own counter-sanctions. Minsk also maintains normal relations with Kiev, and serves as a meeting place for Russian and Ukrainian officials discussing the situation in Donbass.

The new NATO-Russia stand-off is at a much lower level than the NATO-Warsaw Pact situation, but it carries significant risks. NATO insists on proportionality and transparency. Its leaders repeat that they seek no confrontation, and do not need a new cold war. Yet, confrontation is a fact, not to be wished away. Unlike in the Cold War, this confrontation is highly asymmetrical, with Russia outnumbered, outgunned, outperformed in nearly every field, – excluding nuclear weapons – and in the capacity for swift and resolute action. Again, as different from the 20th century, there is virtually no respect between the parties, including their top leaders. Finally, the fear of a nuclear war has receded, and the willingness to engage in brinkmanship has increased.

Russian strategic bombers have flown along the borders of NATO countries to send a message to them that, should the Ukraine conflict escalate, they, too, would be affected. US and other NATO reconnaissance planes and warships have come close to Russia's borders, to monitor the situation and send a message in return – namely, that the West cares about Ukraine, and the alliance would protect its exposed eastern members. These flights have occasionally resulted in close encounters, in which Russian and NATO warplanes and ships came too close to each other, with potentially fatal accidents literally only a few meters away.

As this game of chicken was repeatedly played over the Baltic and the Black Sea, the Western public and leaders were calling for a halt of such practices by the Russian side. The Kremlin, however, was unimpressed. To the Russian leadership, the root cause of the confrontation was the West's own actions, starting with what, to Moscow, was Western instigation of the Maidan "coup" in Kiev and, more broadly, the whole project of NATO's eastern enlargement. Now, with most of the action in the vicinity of Russia's own borders, the Kremlin felt it was defending the country's sovereignty and protecting its vital national security interests.

When, following the breakdown of another US-Russian cooperation effort in Syria in September 2016, President Putin decided to suspend the plutonium agreement with the United States, he accompanied his formal letter to the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, with a list of adverse material changes in Russia's security environment which had moved him to pull out of the Russian-US accord. Top of the list were NATO enlargement; the expansion of NATO's infrastructure toward

Russia's borders, and US/NATO ballistic missile defenses. Any serious improvement in Russian-Western relations, according to Vladimir Putin, was only possible if those concerns were seriously addressed. Since such a turnaround by NATO is hardly even thinkable in the foreseeable future, and Russia changing course as demanded by the West is equally out of the realm of the possible, Russia-NATO relations are in a deep freeze.

What to do?

Thus, whereas the 2014 summit in Wales marked the end of the NATO-Russia partnership, the 2016 Warsaw Summit has ushered in something that many thought would never return: a military standoff in Europe. The new confrontation between Russia and the West, begun as a result of the Ukraine crisis, is acquiring a measure of permanence. Rather than deploring this situation, which is certainly deplorable, or engaging in blaming the other side, which will certainly continue, the issue at hand now is to make sure that this new confrontation does not lead to a new major conflict. This means stabilizing the standoff, learning to manage the adversity, and keeping the channels of communication open for serious exchanges.

To make such exchanges more productive, each party needs to understand, to begin with, where the other one is coming from. The Russians have to acknowledge that Moscow's response to the Kiev Maidan – first in Crimea, and then in south-eastern Ukraine – materially challenged the global system presided over and guaranteed by the United States, and delivered a shattering blow to the concept of the European peace order, which had become an article of faith for German, French and other European politicians. This challenge is fundamental, and the resultant confrontation cannot be patched over. There will be much contention between the two sides before there is a clear outcome.

The West, for its part, needs to acknowledge that the standoff with Russia is not merely the result of Russia turning authoritarian, nationalistic and assertive. European history suggests that a failure after a major conflict – and the Cold War was such a conflict – to create an international order acceptable to the defeated party – and the Soviet Union did not survive the Cold War – leads to a new round of competition. The famous phrase of US President George H.W. Bush about a “Europe whole and free” applied to all countries west of the Russian border. Russia was to be a partner, but not part of the arrangement. Thus NATO enlargement, which was promoted as a symbol of consolidation of a continent-wide democratic peace and development in

Europe, became, in the eyes of the Russian elites, a means of consolidating the triumphant West's strategic position vis-à-vis a sidelined Russia.

This mutual "acknowledgment" should not constitute acceptance of the other side's narrative. There is virtually no common ground between the two prevailing visions of the recent past. What is more important, however, is the present, and the future. With regard to the present, the most urgent task, of course, is to prevent incidents in Europe's skies between Russian and NATO aircraft, and in Europe's seas between naval ships. Whatever the source of the current confrontation, the possible collisions and casualties would send the confrontation to a qualitatively more dangerous level. Incident prevention absolutely needs to be pursued, and institutionalized.

With regard to the future, since a new military standoff along Russia's western border is already a fact, the task should be to keep the level of forces appreciably low. The reinforcements announced before Warsaw – 4,000 allied personnel stationed on a rotating basis in Poland and the Baltic States – would not make the Russian General Staff overly agitated. The Russian counter-move of deploying three divisions to the Western military district was entirely predictable. Ideally, both sides should leave it at that. Otherwise, a totally unproductive and senseless cycle of remilitarization of Europe's divisions will follow.

Missile defenses are another area where the action-reaction logic could lead to an arms race. The Romanian site, the Russians acknowledge, as currently configured, is not a major issue. However, should it be reconfigured for a different kind of missiles, which is technically possible, it might become one. To allay Russian suspicions and thus to prevent Moscow's response, the only way forward is through confidence-building measures. The Polish site, which will not become operational until 2018, faces a similar dilemma: either convincing the Russians that they have no reason to overreact, or facing the likelihood that they would. Kaliningrad, Russia's enclave inside NATO territory, is already being turned into a forward position for Russian counter-measures potentially reaching deep into the alliance's rear.

To keep the revived rivalry under control, continuous and unbroken communication at appropriate levels is a must. Until now, NATO-Russian contacts were severed each time there was a crisis in Europe: in 1999 over Kosovo/Serbia, in 2008 over South Ossetia/Georgia, in 2014 over Crimea/Ukraine. Both sides viewed contacts with the other as a privilege that could be withdrawn at will. With partnership over, this should no longer be allowed to be the case. On the contrary, the NATO-Russia Council needs

to be reconfigured to serve as an all-weather conflict management mechanism, designed to work overtime each time there is a new crisis in the relationship. As for the ongoing crisis in Donbass, it needs to be brought under much tighter control.

While the Minsk II agreement remains unimplemented in its key political provisions, due to Kiev's current inability to fulfill them, measures need to be taken to disengage the parties to the conflict militarily, so as to reduce or end shelling and bombardments across the line of contact. A UN-mandated peacekeeping force would be the guarantor of full cessation of hostilities. The improvement of the security situation would help promote political steps leading to gradual amelioration of the situation. Russia, however, will insist that a measure of autonomy for Donbass within Ukraine would need to persist. At the end of the day, what matters most to Moscow are constitutional and other legal guarantees of Ukraine's formally neutral status between NATO and Russia.

During the Ukraine crisis, top military commanders and spokesmen for both sides were liberal with public statements about the bad behavior of the other side. They talked to domestic and international audiences, but never to their counterparts across the new divide in Europe. Yet, the Kremlin-White House hot line is not enough, even in combination with a direct link between the US Secretary of State and the Russian Foreign Minister. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) needs to be able to get in touch with the commander of Russia's Western military district, and the Russian Chief of the General Staff needs a direct line to the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The shock of the sudden rupture over, Russia and NATO have to come to terms with the new reality of mutual adversity, which promises to last a number of years. Their conflict is anything but trivial, but it is clearly not worth a European war, which should be securely prevented through joint precautionary measures. It is probably still too early for Russian and Western officials to seriously discuss a new security architecture for Europe; the current round of competition is just starting and will take time to run its course. However, they need to be permanently in touch with each other to ensure that what is left of the existing architecture does not fall onto their – and their citizens' – heads.

Looking beyond the present, Russia and NATO, of course, realize that the security of all European countries is interconnected. They may agree, in the medium term, to some measures of arms control, which would add

to confidence-building measures and mechanisms. They might even find a way to collaborate, on a bilateral level, in the fight against extremism and terrorism that threatens them all, as in the Middle East. They might even rise to moderate their tensions over the Arctic. Eventually political relations between Russia and NATO countries and the alliance structures might assume an air of cold correctness reminiscent of the calmer periods of the Cold War. This would not build trust, but it would leave both sides feeling somewhat safer.

In the longer run, the Russia-NATO relationship will become increasingly subsumed within the broader web of security alignments and rivalries in the emerging Greater Eurasia, from the Pacific to the Atlantic. There, China is steadily raising its geopolitical and strategic, not just economic, profile. China and Russia are not going to become military allies, but they cooperate ever more closely on the basis of a number of parallel security interests and inspired by a similarly strong rejection of the US-dominated global order. This will have relevance also for NATO: in the 21st century, the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific are no longer two separate strategic universes.

Greater Eurasia is already displaying a multipolar strategic landscape. China is certainly a pole of the first order, but Russia is rebuilding its conventional military capability and is again very active geopolitically across the continent, from the Arctic to Eastern Europe to the Middle East to Central Asia. India is rising to assume the position of a great continental and oceanic power. Other players are stepping into the fray as serious independent players on a regional level, from Turkey and Iran to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. There are powerful non-state actors, such as the Islamic State, the Taliban, and others. The number of active contenders will grow, making the security environment more complex, and demanding new approaches to regional and continental stability.

Responding to Russian activism and Chinese power growth, the United States, which sees these countries as its number one and number two security challengers, respectively, has sought to reinvigorate its alliances in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Yet, some of the key US allies, such as Turkey, Israel and Japan, are also seeking an understanding with Moscow. Others, such as the Gulf Arab states, are diversifying their policies away from over-reliance on Washington. Europeans, by and large, are holding together, but Europe's future organization will be determined by the outcome of the EU's ongoing seminal crisis, which has many aspects: economic, political and social. For now, NATO looks safe, having finally

rediscovered its original mission, but nothing should be taken for granted in the longer term.

With NATO as an alliance focused again on the Russian threat, however, NATO is no longer a partner or even a diplomatic counterpart for Moscow. In a disciplined, consolidated alliance, it only makes sense to talk to its leader – which means Washington, not Brussels. To discuss matters of European security, the Russians are again talking to the Americans. In such an environment, Russia-NATO relations are relegated to a technicality of passing rare formal messages between the sides while seeking to learn – less formally – what the adversary is really up to.

