

U.S.-RUSSIA INSIGHT

Note: The rupture in Russia's relationship with the West has laid bare a vastly different and often unsettling Russian narrative about the events of the past quarter century, let alone the challenge of fostering a stable post-Cold War security order in Europe. Yet the robust discussion of the country's national security priorities, threat perceptions, and strategic culture in Russian language military journals and publications remains essential reading for Western observers. To be sure, these discussions usually include assumptions and viewpoints that are sharply and unapologetically at odds with the standard discourse in NATO countries. This essay on the fast-evolving European security situation by Aleksandr Khranchikhin—one of Russia's most wide-ranging and prolific military observers and analysts—sheds light on how many Russians view the strategic environment and the strengths, weaknesses, and intentions of their adversaries in the West.

RETHINKING THE DANGER OF ESCALATION: THE RUSSIA-NATO MILITARY BALANCE

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The downturn in relations between Russia and the West in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ukrainian government of Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 and the Crimean referendum to join the Russian Federation has resulted in the worst crisis in East-West relations since before the end of the Cold War. The West has accused Russia of illegally occupying a part of Ukraine and launching an undeclared war in its eastern provinces. Russia has countered with charges that the West was not willing to recognize the legitimate will of the people of Crimea and had been pursuing regime change in Kyiv. Amid mutual accusations, both sides have moved beyond the post-Cold War security framework in Europe, which they have realized is now a thing of the past.

In an atmosphere of crisis permeated by mutual recriminations and suspicions, both sides—NATO and Russia—have engaged in a series of military activities along the line of contact. These maneuvers in turn have triggered multiple warnings from both sides of a sharp deterioration in European security, a growing threat of a military confrontation between Russia and NATO, and an urgent need to deescalate the situation in order to avoid a catastrophic war with disastrous consequences for all. An emerging conventional wisdom

maintains that the new Cold War in Europe, if allowed to continue unchecked, runs the risk of escalating into a hot war unless steps to reduce tensions are taken swiftly.

But conventional wisdom is often wrong, and so it is this time. The hysteria that has engulfed public commentary throughout Europe about this ostensibly dire military situation on the brink of getting out of hand has little, if any, basis in fact. Both sides in the standoff exaggerate the tensions and the danger of escalation, and the risks of the military moves—their own and their adversary's—supposedly driving these tensions.

In reality, the military balance between Russia and NATO is stable, the danger of escalation is hardly approaching critical levels, and little needs to be done militarily to defuse the current tensions. The true cause of the tensions is not military, but political and diplomatic. Until those causes are resolved, tensions between Russia and the West will remain high. The likelihood of a military confrontation will remain low, however, because neither side's posture points to a heightened state of readiness or intention to go on the offensive. Until that changes, political and diplomatic tensions will remain mere tensions.

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THE BALANCE, THEN AND NOW

The best evidence that the military situation in Europe is stable and that the continent is not on the brink of World War III is in the forces that each side has available for conducting military operations. Even a brief comparison of the present-day arsenals of Russia and NATO to those of the Soviet Union and NATO during the height of the Cold War should allay fears of military conflict (see table 1). This comparison should also take into account critically important political and psychological factors. Russia's and NATO's present-day forces do not measure up well against their predecessors of a generation ago.

One remarkable feature of the present situation is that even though the number of NATO member states has nearly doubled since the end of the Cold War, the alliance's order of battle across many classes of weaponry has decreased since 1982, when East-West tensions were high. Over the past quarter century, military technology has developed rapidly, new weaponry has come online, and many advances in warfare have taken place. However, the arsenals of most European countries have had minimal qualitative improvements that do not begin to compensate for the major reductions in their military capabilities. Major acquisitions of military hardware have been limited mostly to wheeled armored personnel carriers (APCs) to be employed in expeditionary warfare.

The size of the U.S. military presence in Europe has decreased to an even greater degree since the end of the Cold War. At the beginning of 2016, the U.S. military had deployed ten brigades in Germany, but only two of these (the 2nd cavalry regiment and 12th combat aviation brigade) were actual fighting elements; the remaining eight were purely support units.¹ One American airborne brigade is deployed in Italy.² In 2017, the U.S. Air Force component deployed in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom had nine wings, but these are primarily support units, and there are only six fighting squadrons.³

These cuts in military hardware are consistent with a general tendency in the West (to a greater extent in Europe than in the United States) to embrace ideas of hedonism, pacifism, postmodernism, tolerance, and political correctness. A 2016 Pew survey found that Europeans overall, with the exception of the Poles and Dutch, do not support increasing defence spending. Many Europeans are reluctant to support the use of

hard power in international affairs.⁴ A 2017 Pew survey found that Europeans are also divided in terms of their willingness to come to a NATO ally's defense against Russia, with Germany, the UK, and Spain demonstrating the least support.⁵ Along with the falling birth rates experienced in these countries, this shift in defense dynamics makes it virtually impossible to conduct a war that would result in major loss of life.

As a result of these shifts in attitudes and ideological trends, NATO troops may be unlikely to demonstrate heroism and willingness to make sacrifices,⁶ elements that are absolutely essential in wartime. Almost all NATO countries have transitioned to an all-volunteer military force, which has further decreased the motivation of their military personnel, or at least suggests that they are motivated more by money than by patriotism. The transition to an all-volunteer force has also resulted in increased defense spending, for reasons that deserve further consideration.

Like those of its NATO rivals, Russia's modern-day military capabilities do not compare favorably with the combined military machine of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies (see table 2). Even a cursory comparison of Soviet and Eastern European militaries at the height of the Cold War—in 1982—and now makes clear that Russia is not poised for offensive action in the European theater.

THE HIGH COST OF WAR

NATO forces are highly sensitive to the risk of incurring casualties,⁷ and this heightened sensitivity was one of the reasons many Western countries chose to develop a concept of noncontact network-centric warfare heavily reliant on precision-guided munitions (PGM). However, this approach requires extremely expensive weaponry, equipment, ammunition, and supplies. Shrinking NATO military forces and arsenals mean that significant losses of lives or hardware have become unacceptable: losing even a few tanks and aircraft is now almost a catastrophe, comparable to losing a battleship or an armored division.

A high-intensity war that calls for large stocks of ammunition is also becoming prohibitively expensive—a trend illustrated by the evolution of wars that NATO countries have waged over the last quarter century. In 1991, NATO countries,

Table 1: Select Indicators of NATO Forces in Europe (1982 and 2017)

	1982 ¹		2017		
	NATO ²	U.S. in Europe	NATO	U.S. in Europe	NATO Eastern Flank (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland)
Total active duty personnel³	2,600,000	273,729	1,856,057	63,400	296,040
Divisions	84	4	16	—	3
Mechanized brigades	—	2	47	—	2
Motorized rifle brigades	—	—	—	—	—
Light brigades	—	—	12	—	3
Motorized infantry brigades	—	—	13	—	1
Armored brigades	—	1	16	—	—
Armored brigade combat teams (rotational)⁴	n/a	n/a	1	1	1
Combat aviation brigades (rotational)⁵	n/a	n/a	1	1	1
Misc. aviation/airborne brigades	—	—	18	2	3
Misc. brigades	—	1	23	—	—
Artillery regiments	—	—	13	—	—
Misc. aviation regiments	—	—	8	—	—
Misc. regiments	—	2	12	1	—
Misc. infantry battalions	—	—	15	—	—
Artillery/tank battalions	—	—	6	—	—
Misc. battalions	—	—	18	—	1
Main battle tanks⁶	13,000	3,000	7,101	200	1,075
Artillery/mortars⁷	10,750	NR	19,272	100	1,299
APCs and IFVs⁸	30,000	NR	24,265	200	2,946
Helicopters⁹	2,200	NR	3,301	137	265
Attack	400	NR	430	48	32
Transport/support/ASW	1,800	NR	2,871	89	233
Combat-capable aircraft	2,975	770	2,537	—	98
Fighter-bomber/ground attack/interceptor	2,690	663	2,307	136	98

Sources

NATO, *NATO and the Warsaw Pact Force Comparisons 1982* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1982); International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 1981-1982* (London: IISS, 1981); IISS, *The Military Balance 2017* (London: IISS, 2017); “United States Army Europe Fact Sheets,” United States Army Europe, 2017.

Notes

¹ The year 1982 was chosen as representative of a period during which East-West tensions were high and both sides were at their full military potential.

² This column's figures do not include France, which did not participate in NATO's integrated military structure in 1982.

- ³ The total active personnel in 2017 include 5,500 U.S. troops deployed as part of the European Reassurance Initiative's two rotational brigades. The 2017 NATO Eastern Flank figures include the 5,500 troops, of which an unspecified number are deployed in Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, and Romania.
- ⁴ In 2017, the United States deployed two brigades on nine-month, back-to-back rotations as part of its European Reassurance Initiative, with units deployed across Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ The 1982 United States in Europe figure includes only medium battle tanks, based on the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) 1982 Military Balance figures. The 2017 NATO and United States in Europe figures include eighty-seven tanks deployed as part of the U.S. Army's rotational Second Armored Brigade Combat Team. The 2017 NATO Eastern Flank figures include both main battle tanks deployed with the U.S. Army rotational brigade and an unspecified number of tanks deployed in Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, and Romania.
- ⁷ The IISS did not report U.S. artillery deployed in Europe in 1982. The 2017 artillery figures include data from Greece, Spain, and Turkey, which contribute 12,977 artillery pieces to the total but are unlikely to take part in a confrontation with Russia on NATO's northern flank. The 2017 NATO and United States in Europe figures include eighteen artillery pieces deployed as part of the U.S. Army's rotational Second Armored Brigade Combat Team. The 2017 NATO Eastern Flank figures include both artillery deployed with the U.S. Army's rotational brigade and an unspecified number of artillery deployed in Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, and Romania.
- ⁸ The IISS did not report U.S. armored personnel carriers (APCs) and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) deployed in Europe in 1982. The 2017 NATO and United States in Europe figures include 125 Bradley Fighting Vehicles and 419 Humvees deployed as part of the U.S. Army's rotational Second Armored Brigade Combat Team. The 2017 NATO Eastern Flank figures include both vehicles deployed with the U.S. Army's rotational brigade and an unspecified number of vehicles deployed in Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, and Romania.
- ⁹ The IISS did not report U.S. helicopters deployed in Europe in 1982. The 2017 NATO and United States in Europe figures include eighty-nine helicopters deployed as part of U.S.'s rotational combat aviation brigade (First Air Cavalry Brigade), twenty-four of which are attack helicopters. The 2017 NATO Eastern Flank figures include thirteen helicopters, four of which are attack helicopters, deployed with the U.S. Army's rotational brigade in Latvia and Poland.

Table 2: Select Indicators of Warsaw Pact Forces (1982) and Russian Forces (2017)

	1982	2017
	Warsaw Pact ¹	Russia ²
Total active duty personnel³	4,000,000	831,000
Divisions	173	9
Motorized rifle brigades	n/a	19
Misc. aviation brigades	n/a	3
Misc. brigades	n/a	18
Artillery regiments	n/a	1
Misc. aviation regiments	n/a	16
Misc. regiments	n/a	1
Main battle tanks	42,500	2,950
Artillery/mortars	31,500	5,317
APCs and IFVs	78,800	13,132
Helicopters	1,700	937
Attack	700	348
Transport/support	1,000	589
Combat-capable aircraft	7,240	1,251
Fighter-bomber/ground attack/interceptor	6,640	974

Source

NATO, *NATO and the Warsaw Pact Force Comparisons 1982* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1982); IISS, *The Military Balance 2017* (London: IISS, 2017).

Notes

¹ These totals include Warsaw Pact forces as far east as but excluding the three Western Military Districts (Moscow, Volga, and Urals) in western Russia.

² Russian forces include only those in the Western and Southern military districts, except for active duty personnel.

³ This is the total number of active duty personnel in all Russian military districts.

with significant support from both Egypt and Syria, roundly defeated Iraq's large and well-equipped army in Operation Desert Storm. The coalition against Iraq used PGMs only against high-value targets in the Desert Storm campaign.

This successful employment of PGMs, combined with the contemporaneous demise of both the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, gave rise to an illusion among Western defense establishments that they could drastically cut the number of PGM platforms, primarily aircraft. This decision was based on the assumption that the high accuracy of new weapons could compensate for having fewer platforms that would deliver the same lethality. However, lethality depends on the available munitions, which in real combat are never 100 percent accurate; munitions in turn depend on the number of delivery vehicles, which have become drastically more expensive, both in real terms because of technological advances and in relative terms because there are now fewer of them.

The result is that Western militaries are best equipped to wage war against countries that have extremely weak anti-aircraft defenses or none at all. Moreover, supposedly expendable PGMs are increasingly expensive. In some instances, their cost is equal to or greater than the target they are supposed to destroy. Because of their high cost, PGMs are produced in smaller quantities than the number of potential targets. As a result, even a war against a much weaker adversary is becoming less economical. These trends crystallized as early as in 1999 during the aggression against Yugoslavia, when NATO forces crushed Yugoslavia's much smaller, very obsolete armed forces. It is noteworthy that NATO expenses on that war turned out to be comparable to the damage that NATO's assault inflicted on the Yugoslavian army and economy, even though NATO's own combat losses were minimal.

During the 2011 campaign in Libya, after the United States effectively ended its participation, its European allies expended vast quantities of jet fuel and PGMs but failed to defeat Libya's obsolete and poorly trained army despite its lack of effective air defense. The Europeans ultimately had to resort to bribing several tribal sheikhs opposed to Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi in order to defeat his army. The campaign depleted the allies' stocks of PGMs, necessitating considerable expenditures to replace them. Denmark had to buy munitions from Israel after the NATO operation quickly depleted Danish

stockpiles.⁸ Norway had to withdraw from the campaign in Libya after just over four months because its small air force could not maintain its involvement.⁹ Had the hostilities continued for another two or three months, the same would have happened to both British and French forces—a fact that was publicly recognized after the end of the hostilities.¹⁰ In the Libya campaign, the combined air forces of the NATO countries, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar carried out 26,000 sorties, including 9,600 operational sorties, and destroyed 5,900 targets (including approximately 600 armored vehicles and 400 artillery systems).¹¹ Based on these figures, destroying each target, on average, called for 1.7 operational sorties and 4.4 sorties—a ratio that is hardly a model of efficiency, especially in light of the weak adversary and the nature of the targets. Qaddafi's armed forces had obsolete weapons and military equipment produced by the Soviet Union, France, and Brazil between the 1960s and the 1980s. The price tag of each piece of weaponry destroyed is comparable to the price tag of each piece of ordnance used to destroy it.

Similarly, the U.S. Navy's strike against the Al-Shairat air base in Syria in April 2017 fit this pattern of disproportionate spending to achieve desired results. Having expended 1.5 percent of the available arsenal of sea-launched tactical Tomahawk cruise missiles, the operation destroyed only some fifteen pieces of aviation and ground support equipment produced in the 1960s and 1970s.¹² The expenditures on that missile strike were many times greater than the damage inflicted on the air base.¹³

Elsewhere, the war in Afghanistan that the United States and its allies have been waging since 2001 has not produced many tangible results, despite vast material expenditures as well as combat and civilian casualties. Throughout the conflict, almost all European troops have sought to avoid any military engagement with the adversary, but even that method of war-fighting—or rather, not fighting—is becoming unacceptable for NATO countries.

NOBODY WANTS TO FIGHT

The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia revealed that NATO had lost its will to fight. Despite the pro-Western policies of then president Mikheil Saakashvili and his push for Georgia to join NATO, the latter offered no assistance to

Georgia during the war with Russia. Moreover, after the war, NATO introduced an unspoken but strictly enforced embargo on supplying any military hardware to Georgia. NATO's inaction during the 2008 Georgian-Russian conflict and the 2014 Ukrainian crisis sent a signal to both the Baltic and Polish elites and publics that their NATO membership would be unlikely to save them in the event of Russian aggression and that their fellow NATO countries would not help them. "Old" NATO countries, not least the United States, could ill afford to ignore such sentiments, and since 2014, they have felt compelled to send a political signal by deploying at least some military forces to Eastern Europe.

That deployment cannot be large for several reasons. First, not even the United States, to say nothing of its European allies, has sufficient military and financial resources to deploy large military units in Eastern Europe. Second, despite their tough anti-Russian rhetoric, NATO leaders are apprehensive about the prospect of escalating tensions with Moscow, and such escalation is likely if they deploy significant military forces in countries along Russia's borders. Third, even though the likelihood of Russian aggression in that region is tantamount to zero, NATO leaders believe that it cannot be ruled out.

Military deployments from other NATO countries to Poland and especially to the Baltic states have a purely political rather than military rationale, one that official NATO representatives recognize. Because NATO's military units in the Baltic states would likely be quickly defeated in a Russian attack, there would be no point in sacrificing them or deploying them only to be held hostage there. Their mission would be not to repel Russian aggression, but to provide a guarantee that in the event of such an aggression the United States and Western Europe would go to war, since their troops would also come under attack from the Russian armed forces. All of the talk in Russia about the threat of a NATO attack is nothing more than a propaganda ploy. And in light of this situation, it makes no sense whatsoever to deploy U.S. military equipment and personnel in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania.

All the same, recent NATO exercises have included a U.S. Stryker brigade conducting maneuvers in several Eastern European countries. A Stryker Brigade Combat Team, equipped with rather thin-skinned armored personnel carriers (APCs) driving around Eastern European countries, is

hardly a show of force. Stryker brigades can be meaningfully employed against poorly equipped, underdeveloped militaries, but not against well-organized and trained combatants. When such limited exercises accompany statements by NATO officials that they are sending a clear and strong message to Russia, that message takes on a grotesque quality.

A military confrontation between NATO and Russia would take on an entirely different quality than the campaigns in Libya, Iraq, or Serbia. They have never defended against modern strike aircraft and never waged wars in an environment of wide-scale electronic countermeasures saturation by the adversary. In recent decades, NATO air forces have engaged in dogfights only with a small number of Iraqi and Serbian MiG-29 fighters of the earliest export modifications. NATO pilots have had to contend with third-generation fighters and surface-to-air missile systems produced in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴ They have never engaged in dogfights against more advanced aircraft like the Su-27 (even those of earlier modifications), MiG-31, Su-30M2/SM, or Su-35C fighters, and they have never confronted the S-300P/V (those of earlier modifications) and S-400 missile systems, the Buk anti-aircraft missile systems, and the Tor (all modifications) surface-to-air missile systems. Similarly, they have never dealt with the Tunguska and Pantsir anti-aircraft missile and gun systems.

Quantitatively and qualitatively, NATO forces are unprepared to wage war against the modern armed forces of the Russian Federation.¹⁵ Even if NATO is able to successfully develop and deploy a Prompt Global Strike—similar to the concept of network-centric noncontact warfare in that it aims to destroy an adversary's ability to retaliate against an attack—NATO will be unable to go to war against Russia. The arsenal of sea- and air-launched cruise missiles at the disposal of the U.S. Navy and Air Force is insufficient to simultaneously destroy Russia's strategic nuclear forces and its aircraft defenses in a surprise attack. A partial success in this context is meaningless, inasmuch as it would result in an all-out nuclear exchange with mutually assured destruction. A sea- and air-launched cruise missile strike against Russian conventional forces only would not be successful either, if only because it would be impossible to achieve surprise in this situation.

Such scenarios would be fraught with an extremely high risk of rapid nuclear escalation. Russia would construe an attack

using intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) or submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with conventional warheads as the beginning of a nuclear attack, which would trigger an immediate retaliatory strike. In all likelihood, the West will not be able to gain decisive technological superiority over the armed forces of the Russian Federation for the foreseeable future, a precondition for being able to wage war almost without losses, as its current operational approach seems to prefer.

Since the downturn in East-West relations following the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, it has become popular to claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin has “reenergized NATO.” Such statements appear to be exaggerations to say the least. Aside from the limitations of its military capacity, NATO’s inadequate capabilities are also a consequence of its psychological disarmament, which in turn is a product of the prevailing ideology in the West. Trends of pacifism and Europeans’ reluctance to use military force, the transition to all-volunteer militaries, the tendency to treat any combat veteran as a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the pursuit of gender diversity amount to a powerful psychological barrier that makes it impossible for Europe to wage an offensive or a defensive war against Russia.

The U.S. military is generally better prepared and equipped than those of the Europeans, but it too is affected by the same trends as Europe’s armies. Moreover, the United States is not facing the threat of “Russian aggression” even as a matter of propaganda. Therefore, one can only wonder about the willingness of American soldiers to die in Europe by the thousands, when their presence in combat there would likely increase the probability of Russian ICBMs and SLBMs striking cities in the United States in the event of war.

Despite the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, NATO countries have not adopted any new defense programs beyond programs that were already under way, none of which have been expanded. Programs crafted under the rubric of strengthening the defenses of Eastern Europe cannot be taken seriously as they amount to mere manipulation of existing military forces that are simply redeployed from rearward areas to the theater of operations. There are no plans to put any new military units in place. Any claim of a NATO revival is taking place only in rhetorical terms. Western elites

seem eager to punish Russia for its perceived bad behavior; that is, its willingness to violate the West’s monopoly on trampling international law. But this punishment is hardly sufficient to change the mentality of Western societies.

RUSSIA’S MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Russia’s recent military modernization started from a very low base, since for about fifteen years—from the mid-1990s almost to the end of the 2000s—the Russian military purchased almost no equipment except for ICBMs and SLBMs. By the end of the 2000s, the Russian military was approaching a state of complete collapse. The Russian army was on the verge of disintegrating into groups of men armed with Kalashnikovs. Faced with that prospect, the Russian government had no choice but to launch a broad program of military procurement across a wide range of weapons and equipment. The pace of Russian military hardware upgrades in recent years has outpaced that of NATO. Russian purchases of new types of military hardware across all types of weapons have been greater than in all NATO countries (including the United States) taken together.¹⁶

As is the case with NATO, Russia has no experience waging war against an adversary with comparable military potential. The Russian operation in Syria, like NATO’s operation in Libya, has involved air assaults against an adversary that has no effective air defenses. Russia’s ground forces have fought in Georgia, eastern Ukraine, and Syria, but those conflicts have been limited in terms of forces engaged, scale of operations, and duration. In addition, the adversaries in those conflicts were rather weak.

Russian armed forces’ tolerance for personnel losses, although not unlimited, is much higher—perhaps by an order of magnitude—than that of the U.S. armed forces, to say nothing of European armies. The level of tolerance of personnel losses depends on how the Russian public at large perceives a given war. If a war is perceived as just, then tolerance for losses tends to be higher, and the opposite is generally true for wars perceived to be unjust or unwarranted. Personnel losses in recent wars waged by Russia are so minuscule that the public at large does not even consider Russia to be a party to any conflict.

The thesis of Russia's century-old inherent aggressiveness has been popular in the West. It is a convenient stereotype for propaganda purposes, but it has nothing to do with reality. Throughout its history, from the Principality of Muscovy to the Soviet Union, Russia has never been more aggressive than any other state of comparable geopolitical magnitude during the same historical period, and has followed the norms of a given historical period. That is exactly what the Russian Federation currently seeks: the right to play by the commonly accepted rules.

One can call Russian actions in Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia annexation, aggression, or occupation all one wants, but the fact is that the vast majorities of the populations of these three territories consider Russia as the liberator, whereas Ukraine and Georgia are perceived as enemies.¹⁷ Changes in the status of these territories are an extension of the process of disintegration of the Soviet Union, whose internal boundaries were utterly artificial. The so-called hierarchy of nations within the Soviet Union itself was even more artificial.

An outright seizure of a territory with a predominantly disloyal population would be a senseless move by Moscow. It would not bring any economic or geopolitical benefits, but instead would entail many difficulties. From a purely military perspective, seizing the entire territory of Ukraine would not pose a major challenge for Russia. However, it would be economically unsustainable, since the burden of supporting and feeding even a couple regions in eastern Ukraine calls for significant expenditures. Furthermore, the occupying force would have to deal with hostile local populations—a very different situation from Crimea.

The very idea of Russian aggression against a NATO country is absurd and not worth discussing even hypothetically. All such scenarios belong to the category of propaganda or delusions, and are based on a complete lack of understanding of what has happened in the post-Soviet space over the past thirty years. The concept of “hybrid war” also belongs to the category of propaganda. There is no scientific definition of hybrid war, and any attempt to define it will lead anyone to the conclusion that hybrid war is war. War has always been a combination of regular and irregular armed hostilities, as well as economic and information warfare, even if their mix is different from one conflict to another.

In Russia, anti-NATO propaganda has been successful in uniting the nation around the Kremlin. The Americans' weak “show of force” involving a Stryker brigade combat team driving around Eastern Europe has had only one real effect: reinforcing public support for the Kremlin. Yet Russian leaders themselves have a skeptical view of NATO that differs from their official propaganda. If they believed their own propaganda, they would have never used force in South Ossetia, Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine, and Syria. These operations amount to a clear message that Russian leaders are aware that NATO is not capable of standing up to Russia in any of these conflicts. Moreover, prior to the Ukraine crisis, Russia's Southern Military District (which directly borders Ukraine and the Black Sea) had priority over the Western Military District (which contains major cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg) when it came to allocating new armaments. These priorities did not change after the Ukraine crisis.

Moreover, the only new Russian military unit formed in the regions near the border with NATO countries was the 15th Army Aviation Brigade, located in the town of Ostrov (Pskov Region).¹⁸ That step was undertaken as an obvious replication of NATO's strategy of the 1970s and 1980s, when its plans called for repelling the Warsaw Treaty tank onslaught through the large-scale employment of combat helicopters.¹⁹ Another military unit—the 80th Motorized Rifle Brigade—has been formed in Alakurtti (Murmansk Region), but it is a purely experimental unit whose task is to develop Arctic combat operation methods.²⁰ No new military units have been formed in either the Leningrad or Kaliningrad regions, and even the rearmament process for existing units in these places is progressing without hurry.

This situation stands in stark contrast with developments along the Russian-Ukrainian border, from the city of Bryansk to Rostov-on-Don. Three new motorized rifle divisions (3rd, 144th, and 150th) have been formed since 2016.²¹ In addition, the 53rd anti-aircraft missile brigade (the first such brigade in the Russian armed forces equipped with Buk-M3 anti-aircraft missile systems) has been formed within the 20th Army of the Western Military District and 8th Army of the Southern Military District.²² This brigade was formed after the end of active hostilities in Donbass. The lack of fighting units deployed on the border with Ukraine prior to 2014 clearly

indicates that Moscow was not prepared for military confrontation with Kyiv, and all subsequent activities were undertaken in response to unplanned, unforeseen developments.

Western observers have missed one other important issue: the Iskander Tactical Ballistic Missile System could be considered a tactical system of strategic importance. In 2010, Russia's ground forces had ten tactical missile brigades: four in the Western Military District, one in the Southern Military District, two in the Central Military District (which stretches from the Urals to western Siberia), and three in the Eastern Military District (which covers the Russian Far East).²³ All were equipped with the obsolete Tochka-U tactical missiles.²⁴

Efforts to reequip them with Iskanders is a normal process of replacing obsolete systems, though progress has been slow. The first Iskander-M brigade set was deployed in 2010–2011, and in 2011, the Russian government signed a contract for the ten more Iskander-M brigade sets.²⁵ Two of these ten sets of Iskanders were supplied to the two new missile brigades formed after 2011, one in the Southern Military District and one in the Eastern Military District.²⁶ Of the ten additional sets contracted for 2011, the final set was delivered only at the end of November 2017 to the 152th Brigade in Chernyakhovsk, in the Kaliningrad Region. As of January 2018, eleven of the twelve total tactical missile brigades have received Iskander-M missiles. However, one missile brigade, the 448th Brigade deployed in Kursk, near the border with Ukraine, is still armed with the obsolete Tochka-U.²⁷

Of the eleven deployed Iskander-equipped missile brigades, four face Russia's "strategic partner": China.²⁸ Only three Iskander brigades are deployed facing "the aggressive bloc" of NATO, and one of these is deployed in Shuya, in the Ivanovo region, far from the border.²⁹

PROPAGANDA VERSUS REALITY

It is hard to judge from Russia's point of view to what extent NATO's anti-Russian propaganda reflects its real understanding of the situation. The hysteria in NATO countries surrounding the September 2017 Russian-Belarusian military exercises known as Zapad-2017 (West-2017) offers some food for thought. The intent to conduct these exercises was announced four years ago. As with any other preplanned

exercises, they were little more than a ritual similar to prior exercises conducted in 2009 and 2013. Real-life exercises are only those that are conducted without warning, and over the past seven years Russia has conducted snap exercises on a much greater scale than Zapad-2017. Nobody ever expects that a long-scheduled exercise will serve as a cover to initiate real-life hostilities. Speculation about the threat of the Zapad exercises morphing into an attack against a neighboring state only illustrates how the boundary between analysis and propaganda or paranoia has eroded within NATO.

A military confrontation between Russia and NATO can occur in only one scenario: if Russian and U.S. forces in Syria clash and the conflict escalates uncontrollably. A military conflict in Europe appears utterly unrealistic. Neither side has relevant combat experience or sufficient offensive capabilities; nor does either demonstrate any willingness to acquire such capabilities and deploy them for offensive operations. NATO countries are not psychologically prepared for war, and Russia has no real reason to start a war. Given these military realities, if one's goal is to lower the tensions between NATO and Russia, one has to look to the political rather than the military sphere.

Such an approach calls for a realistic perspective on the unfinished business of unrecognized territories. The situations in Kosovo, Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia should be accepted as a *fait accompli* and the relevant legal arrangements will need to be made through United Nations Security Council resolutions and (where necessary) new referendums. Donbass and Transnistria should be given special status within Ukraine and Moldova, respectively. NATO should formally commit not to grant new memberships to any former Soviet country—the Baltic states are already NATO members—and Russia and NATO should abandon a with-us-or-against-us approach to the former Soviet countries.

Finally, both sides need to develop and abide by common rules and regulations governing relations between them. For example, all anti-Russian sanctions imposed by Western countries should be lifted, since they have little effect on Russia but preclude any prospect for dialogue between equals. (Needless to say, the West has neither the legal nor the moral right to "punish" Russia for its transgressions.) If the United States is really interested in easing tensions with the Kremlin

and strengthening democracy in Russia, rather than controlling Russia, it should stop interfering in Russia's domestic affairs. It should stop supporting the pro-Western democratic opposition in Russia. Backing off will be the only way for a pro-Western democratic opposition to be accepted by the Russian public as a native movement rather than be rejected as an agent of foreign influence.

Undoubtedly, the West will not follow this course of action. There are very few Russia experts in the United States and in the West in general. Russia specialists who are native-born Americans rarely have the necessary knowledge of Russia and—most important—they do not understand the context of current developments in Russia. Experts drawn from among immigrants from the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia more often than not have the necessary knowledge and understand the context of life in Russia, but for the obvious reasons they try to present themselves as more American than the Americans themselves. Moreover, they harbor ideological

hatred toward their native country. Therefore, their analysis tends to be biased and laden with propaganda. Thus, American elites have no way to obtain accurate information about Russia and understand what drives its actions. This lack of information explains misguided responses to Russia's actions and unrealistic, unacceptable demands that Moscow surrender unconditionally.

The only way out of this stalemate is to wait for Russian leaders to give up any hope of joining the West. Then, Russia will start its real pivot to the East, along with putting in place a new "Eastern Bloc" that will pursue an antagonistic approach toward the West. The success of this enterprise cannot be taken for granted, and the benefits to Russia from it are not certain. It is entirely possible that it will present Russia with new problems, and the West can be counted on to compound them and create new ones. However, there is no reason to expect that the West will face up to the situation, now or in future.

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U.S.-RUSSIA POLICY OPTIONS FOR THE LONG HAUL

With the U.S.-Russian relationship badly frayed, what are the biggest risks for escalation, deterioration, and miscalculation? What, if any, opportunities exist for halting a continued downward slide?

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The search for mutual understanding and dialogue is all the more challenging at a time when many of the long-established communication channels between Moscow and the West have been suspended as a result of what is increasingly described as a new cold war. Many of the perspectives in this collection differ, at times fundamentally, from the consensus view held by Western policymakers and analysts. Nevertheless, it is all the more vital for policymakers, analysts, and opinion-makers in the West to be informed about views held by their Russian counterparts, as these views oftentimes reflect and inform official Russian policy. This project is supported, in part, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.



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