
Russia and NATO: Mutual Grave Threats, or Reactionaries?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Moscow's March 2014 annexation of Crimea has altered the geopolitical and strategic relationship between Russia and the United States. Since then, US-Russian ties have reached a nadir following a series of bilateral missteps. Both parties should aim to de-escalate the ongoing confrontation in Eastern Europe. Perhaps then, leaders in Washington and Moscow could stop reacting, and start engaging in productive dialogue.

ANALYSIS

Introduction

Moscow's March 2014 annexation of Crimea often has been identified simultaneously as the end of the "reset" policy - a US rapprochement with Russia - and the spark that ignited the "new Cold War" (Hurst), (Rosen). Since then, US-Russian ties have reached a nadir following a series of bilateral missteps. In December 2014 Russia revised its military doctrine and identified the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as a "key external risk" to the country's security (Croft). The move was accompanied by a sizeable military modernisation programme, which alarmed the Alliance's easternmost members, and was termed "highly irresponsible" by NATO observers (Unattributed), (Zolotukhina). More recently, Washington updated its National Military Strategy (NMS). The document identifies Russia foremost among potential threats to the United States, ahead of Iran, North Korea, and China (Fenenko). The NMS release has been accompanied by public pronouncements to the same effect of several high-ranking American military personnel (Lamothe), (Unattributed), (Weisgerber). The increasingly pointed rhetoric has been noted with alarm in Moscow. (Mohammed) However, perhaps the most under-examined issue is whether Russia in fact presents a grave threat to the

US. If not, it is best to tone down the bilateral accusations. Doing so may at least enable American policymakers to "have a rational discourse or debate about American national security" (Kovalik), and how most effectively to engage Russia, even if ties cannot be easily mended.

Is Russian Foreign Policy a Threat to the US?

Whether Russian foreign policy is a danger to the US is hotly debated. One American expert notes that "the 'Russian threat'... has been grossly exaggerated" (Koshkin). Meanwhile, the newly-released US NMS identifies Russia as a critical threat to US security interests (Fenenko). Hawks and pragmatists can be found both in Washington and in Moscow. In the latter category, observers concede that Putin is driven, rightly (Hurst) or wrongly, by a perceived imminent threat of the "encroachment of NATO into Russia's strategic sphere of influence" (Rosen). Whether the resulting escalation is strategic and controlled remains debated by Russian and American specialists (Rosen), (Weir). Understandably, some Russian analysts argue that the confrontation to date has been mostly a symbolic show of strength which Washington and Moscow are sure they can control (Weir), (Goble). Another similar interpretation of current Russian

foreign policy is that rather than attempting to provoke a war with NATO, Moscow is trying to “convey that it is not entirely powerless should the United States take a step too far in the standoff” (Unattributed). Least pragmatically, American analysts frequently explain Russian foreign policy via a “demonisation of [Russian President] Vladimir Putin.” Not only is this “an alibi for the absence of a [Russia] policy,” it also obscures the fact that Putin is a serious strategist (Kissinger), (Kovalik).

A hawkish view among US and Russian observers is that Moscow is trying to revert to the Cold War “where, once again, attack threats against a weak [NATO] ally or series of allies by Russia will force a possible nuclear confrontation” (Shaver). Russian analyst Anatoly Wasserman argues further that “the build-up of weaponry on the eastern fringe of NATO, no matter the official excuse for it, must be considered as preparations for a surprise strike... The RF armed forces have to take preemptive measures to prevent this threat” (Wasserman). In this view, escalation perhaps is necessary and unavoidable in US-Russia relations. However, as will be detailed below, Russian actions likely are reactionary and driven by concerns of NATO expansion. This fact should be considered when devising bilateral diplomatic engagement strategies.

Why is Russia Threatened by NATO Expansion?

From its inception as an anti-Soviet military bloc, NATO has been perceived by Moscow as a key security threat. Moscow points to what it views as yet another broken promise by the US and its NATO allies prior to the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. On February 9, 1990 then-US Secretary of State James H. Baker III committed to “no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east,” provided the Soviets agreed to NATO membership for a unified Germany (Klussman). Although Baker later clarified that he was referring solely to East Germany, Moscow has steadfastly maintained that NATO had promised not to expand into East Europe. Today Russia is “virtually surrounded on its western and southern borders by NATO member nations,” (Hurst) notwithstanding Washington’s past and present assurances.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that Russian officials do not accept current American arguments that NATO in its current form does not pose a threat. To reiterate this stance, the December 2014 version of the Russian military doctrine identified NATO’s expansion up to Russia’s borders as a ‘key risk’ to the country’s security. This perceived expansion fuels concerns that the United States’ Europe-based missile defence system could threaten Russia’s nuclear deterrence capabilities (Rogov). To support this, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasised that

Washington retains nuclear weapons on European soil that are capable of hitting Russian territory, while Moscow has made dramatic reductions to its arsenal (Unattributed). More recently, Russia and NATO have increased the number of military exercises in close proximity to each other along the Russian border (Rosen), (Unattributed). In such a scenario there is a growing risk of accident or miscalculation. Moreover, Washington is considering “an unprecedented plan to ‘pre-position’ heavy weaponry in east European countries that border Russia” (Weir). To fund the effort, the Pentagon has requested a re-allocation of \$160 million USD to allow the US Army to deploy “increased lethality 30mm cannons on its Stryker armoured vehicles based in Europe” (Weisgerber). Having perceived NATO as a threat, Moscow has moved to mitigate the danger in various ways.

Moscow's Response

Russia has responded to the perceived NATO threat in at least three ways. First, it has undertaken a sizeable military modernisation programme. Despite its apparent scope, Moscow might actually be struggling to meet its ambitious military modernisation targets. For instance, there are concerns that the country's defence-industrial base lacks the ability to manufacture all of the new platforms (Zolotukhina). Second, and perhaps most provocatively, Russian

President Vladimir Putin has become “the first Russian leader to continually highlight Russia's nuclear prowess since Nikita Khrushchev” (Unattributed), (Garner). This position has prompted some American analysts to conclude that Moscow is willing to use nuclear weapons to resolve the current standoff (Shaver). This is an extremely dangerous conclusion as it ignores the distance between political discourse and action. Akin to the US, Russia is “not suicidal,” in the words of Sergei Ivanov, Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration (Unattributed). Third, Russia has begun to conduct increased air and sea patrols close to NATO airspace. While there has been no violation of this airspace to date, NATO aircraft stationed in the Baltic States intercepted Russian military planes 150 times in 2014, a fourfold increase from 2013 (Unattributed). The Alliance has noted these events with consternation.

NATO's Response

NATO has countered Russian actions in a variety of ways. Most basically, the Alliance “suspended practical cooperation with Russia” following Moscow's annexation of Crimea (Croft). As mentioned above, NATO has engaged in military exercises with its easternmost members. This has simultaneously somewhat reassured the latter of NATO's commitment, and angered Russia as the Kremlin considers the area part of its sphere

of influence (Andersson). NATO leaders have voiced disapproval of Russia's military modernisation programme, as well as its aggressive reliance on war games. More concretely, several NATO member states are currently restructuring their armed forces in order to cope with Russia's growing military presence. This is particularly true of Norway, which has also increased military cooperation with the Baltic States (Borger). Moreover, the Alliance "approved its longstanding plans to increase the size of the NATO Response Force from 13,000 to 30,000 or 40,000 troops" (Unattributed). NATO also is debating whether to revise its 2010 strategy document to reflect the deteriorating strategic situation vis a vis Russia, a move to which Moscow would "react negatively" (Croft). Washington, like NATO, has noted and responded to Moscow's actions.

The American Response

The US has been especially vocal in its rebuke of recent Russian conduct. Not only have senior military personnel made public pronouncements identifying Russia as the "biggest threat" to the United States, (Unattributed) the US NMS has been updated to reflect that perception of Moscow. Interestingly, this is not new. As noted in the 1994 US Nuclear Posture Review, Moscow "remains a priority adversary as long as it has nuclear parity with Washington" (Fenenko). What is novel, and an escalation, is that now

American officials are publicly drawing attention to this fact (Fenenko). This approach is dangerous not least because in such a charged atmosphere, the aim of both sides should be *de-escalation*. Further, the escalation attempts are questionable because the NMS itself states that "none of [the nations identified as potential threats] are believed to be seeking direct military conflict with the United States or our allies" (Davidson). Further, Washington has backed its words with actions.

Solely American initiatives and joint NATO-US activities in the region have not facilitated the resolution of the confrontation. In the former category, the US has planned and funded an effort to pre-position heavy weapons in East Europe, a move which predictably unnerved Moscow. In the latter instance, NATO members, including the US, executed a military exercise meant to demonstrate its freedom of movement in Russia's "near-abroad." From March 21-April 1, 2015 participants staged a 1,000-mile multi-day convoy of heavy vehicles and soldiers through six countries in the Baltics and East Europe en route to their home station in Vilseck, Germany (Gould). While understandable within the context of the confrontation, such actions do not de-escalate the conflict, nor assuage Moscow's fears of the NATO threat. Conversely, such events likely reinforce Russia's sense of encirclement, thus ensuring an escalation in the Kremlin's actions and rhetoric. As much as

Washington calls on Moscow to back down, perhaps it should lead by example.

Conclusion

Does Russia in fact present a grave threat to the United States? Not exactly. The NMS itself affirms that Moscow does not seek to enter into a military conflict with the United States. As Pavel Koshkin correctly

surmises “[c]learly, the U.S. leaders realise that China, not Russia, poses the major danger to the U.S. monopolistic position in the world” (Koshkin). Furthermore, according to Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution, the chance of a Russia-NATO/US war is “extremely small” (Koshkin). Therefore, should NATO ignore Moscow’s destabilising actions in East Europe? Absolutely not, with a few caveats.

CONCLUSIONS FOR POLICY

1. De-escalation. The aim of Moscow and NATO should be to de-escalate the confrontation in East Europe. In order to achieve this, both must understand the validity of the other side's position. Moscow has felt threatened by NATO historically. That perception persists given Russia's encirclement (the Kremlin's preferred term) by NATO member states. Moscow must act to mitigate that perceived threat. Its actions must evince the Kremlin's deep displeasure, while avoiding escalation. In the latter aim, Moscow has not been successful. Similarly, neither the US nor the Alliance can be idle when faced with Russia's new military modernisation programme, increased military sorties, and training exercises, some in the vicinity of NATO member states. However, toning down the official anti-Russia public rhetoric, and re-opening diplomatic communication channels is within Washington's power. Perhaps then, leaders on both sides could stop reacting, and start engaging in productive dialogue to de-escalate and ultimately resolve the confrontation.

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