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Russia's New National Security Strategy: Stark Realities Confronting the West

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On December 31, 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a new Russian National Security Strategy (NSS).¹ This action was preceded by adoption of a new naval strategy earlier in 2015 and a new military doctrine in December 2014. All of these documents reflect a manifest and growing hostility to the West. According to one of Britain's foremost experts on Russia, Roger McDermott, this Russian NSS "marks the culmination of a long process in deteriorating relations between Moscow and Washington and in how the Russian security elite perceives the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)."²

The 2015 NSS is a blueprint for Moscow's re-establishment of a militaristic, authoritarian state that gains its legitimacy through the blatant promotion internally of nationalism and fear of an imminent Western military threat. Confrontation with the West is now the order of the day as Russia seeks to reassert its "great power" dominion over the former states of the Soviet Union and divert domestic attention away from a declining economy.³ Strong Russian words have been matched by deeds since Russia's 2008 military operations in, and occupation of, Georgian territory. This was followed by the 2014 military occupation and annexation of Crimea, and the on-going Russian military operations in Eastern Ukraine and Syria. By February 2015, more than 2,000 Russian soldiers reportedly had been killed in the Ukrainian conflict, and over 3,000 seriously wounded.⁴ The Russian motivation for its military intervention in Syria appears to be both protection of the incumbent Assad regime and belief that appearing to fight terrorism in Syria would encourage the loosening of Western sanctions imposed on Russia for its aggression in Ukraine.

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INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 401 | February 9, 2016

Russia's military actions since 2008 are not ad hoc improvisation. They reflect the underlying goals of stoking nationalism internally and expanding Russian domination to previous heights through the use of force when necessary and possible. Under Putin's NSS, Russian security is to be enhanced by what amounts to a revival of national "Russification," including in neighboring lands. Russia will seek "the preservation and augmentation of traditional Russia spiritual and moral values as the foundation of Russian society, and its education of children and young people in a civil spirit." This includes "the creating of a system of spiritual-moral and patriotic education of citizens." Additionally, the NSS accuses the West of causing the Ukrainian crisis, fomenting "color revolutions," destroying "traditional Russian religious and moral values," "creating seas of tension in the Eurasian region," and pursuing "multifarious and interconnected" threats to Russian national security.

The new NSS also declares that Russia has demonstrated the ability, "to protect the rights of compatriots abroad." Protecting the "rights" of Russian ethnics abroad, as Moscow has demonstrated in Georgia and Ukraine, can include military invasion and territorial annexation. If this policy seems akin to Germany's 1930s playbook, note too that in January 2016, Russia began burning library books to eliminate harmful foreign influences.⁵

In a January 2016 interview,⁶ Putin declared, "NATO and the USA wanted a complete victory over the Soviet Union. They wanted to sit on the throne in Europe alone." Well-known Russian journalist Pavel Felgenhauer concludes that what Putin wants is "a neutralized Europe...with NATO pared down or fully disbanded."⁷ According to distinguished Russian journalist Alexander Golts, Putin's recent NSS reflects Kremlin "paranoia," and that, "the ideology of the document is that Russia is ringed by enemies."⁸

Given the large numbers of ethnic Russians living within their borders, America's Baltic allies in NATO are particularly concerned about Russia's overarching goals and obvious willingness to use force. For example, Estonia's defense minister, Hannes Hanso, recently observed, "The aftermath of the war in Georgia in 2008 actually encouraged Russia. It got away with it. We took events much more seriously than other countries in Europe and in NATO. When events started to happen in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, we recognized a pattern that Crimea and Ukraine were not one-off events."⁹

Putin's military actions appear not to damage his domestic popularity, which most recently soared to almost 90%.¹⁰ But, as Russian troops marched off to war, Russia went into a severe recession which his Finance Minister Anton Siluanov has warned will require large budget cuts or risk a repeat of the financial crisis of 1998-1999.¹¹ To date, it appears that large cuts in the defense budget have been ruled out.¹²

Russia's on-going nuclear modernization is vastly greater than and predates the Obama Administration's fledgling nuclear modernization programs. Russia reportedly will introduce over a dozen new strategic nuclear systems well before most U.S. nuclear modernization programs begin deployment in the late 2020s,¹³ assuming the funding for US programs actually is sustained. Senior Russian leaders, including Putin, make frequent explicit threats of nuclear attack against NATO allies and partners.

For example, in 2013 Moscow conducted a military exercise that included a mock nuclear strike against neutral Sweden.¹⁴ Correspondingly, Swedish Maj. Gen. Anders Brännström recently said that Sweden could be under attack "within a few years,"¹⁵ and NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg condemned Russian nuclear sabre rattling as "unjustified, destabilizing and dangerous."¹⁶



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 401 | February 9, 2016

The contrast in Russian and Western thinking regarding nuclear weapons is stark. The Obama Administration continues to plead with Russia for further nuclear reductions and advocates further reductions in the number and role of US nuclear weapons.¹⁷ Moscow, in turn, continues to reject US overtures,¹⁸ and thinks in terms of sitting on the “throne of Europe” and how nuclear weapons can help make that happen. As the commanding US Army general in Europe, Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges has observed, “They do talk a lot about using tactical nuclear weapons. For them, it’s a viable option...they talk about using nuclear weapons in a way that none of us would ever do it.”¹⁹ Correspondingly, Pavel Felgenhauer observes that the new NSS also “puts more emphases on ‘preparing civil defenses,’” which were, “an essential part of Soviet war preparations, designed to minimize losses and ensure overall victory in a nuclear standoff with the US and its allies....Cold War-era bunkers are being renovated and prepared for use. The authorities declared that all Russians (over 140 million) will be provided refuge from nuclear attack and radioactive fallout in the event of war with the US.”²⁰

According to Viktor Mikhailov, former Director of Russia’s Sarov nuclear weapons laboratory, Russia is pursuing special, low-yield nuclear weapons to serve as a “*nuclear scalpel*” capable of “surgically” destroying local military targets.²¹ Such weapons, Mikhailov argued, can be used in the event of conventional conflict.²² Indeed, Russian nuclear doctrine appears to call for threatening the first use of nuclear weapons, or the actual first use of nuclear weapons in support of Russian conventional military moves to expand Russia’s domination over former Soviet territory. As if to pre-empt Western hopes that Russia is not serious about its anti-Western vision, the Russian Defense Minister recently announced for 2016 the formation of three new Russian divisions with permanent basing opposite NATO,²³ and Russia also is deploying S-400 advanced surface-to-air missile batteries in its Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad.²⁴

A recent detailed study by the RAND Corporation emphasized that Russian troops could now overrun the territory of NATO’s Baltic allies in 36-60 hours—well before NATO could respond effectively.²⁵ The potential for such a Russian military fait accompli, backed nuclear first-use threats to deter or actual nuclear use to stop any serious NATO response, presents an unprecedented danger and deterrence dilemma for NATO.

NATO has voiced concern about this possibility of Putin attacking a small NATO nation and plunging Europe into war and nuclear crisis. Some in the West respond with the claim that Russian economic troubles will ease this threat without much if any needed response by NATO.²⁶ Indeed, Putin’s policy of state control of the economy has failed and the new NSS speaks at length about Russia’s economic future. During Putin’s first two terms, Moscow benefited from very high energy prices which are now a thing of the past. Pavel Felgenhauer observes the NSS provides a long list of points to develop the economy “without any concrete hints about how all these good things could be achieved.”²⁷

Russia’s current economic woes may ultimately help compel Putin to rein in his vision of renewed Russian domination of Eastern Europe and his corresponding military adventurism. But, those same woes may instead help drive Putin to risk further confrontation with the West to both expand Russia’s area of domination and to further mobilize domestic support for his regime around nationalist sentiment. NATO needs to be prepared for either outcome. This is not Cold War romanticism; it is the current stark reality which NATO must recognize and address.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 401 | February 9, 2016

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INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 401 | February 9, 2016

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