



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 406

June 2, 2016

Responding to the Emerging Potential for War in Europe

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The prospect for a regional war between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is growing. This reality is in stark contrast to the long-standing, sanguine belief that the West's post-Cold War relationship with Russia is benign, even cooperative. Indeed, Western powers appear to have based their security planning largely on the assumption that hostility with Russia is, as asserted by the late former Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, "hardly more likely to be revived than the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."¹

Until recently, such a claim was widely regarded as a self-evident truth. Now, it is demonstrably false. Understanding the fundamental reasons for this emerging prospect for another European war requires an understanding of recent history.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to its breakup into fifteen separate countries and to the disbandment of the Soviet Union's Cold War alliance system, the Warsaw Pact. Several of these new countries formed from the old Soviet Union, including the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and some of its former Warsaw Pact allies, such as Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Czech Republic, chose to move away from Russia politically, militarily and economically. They have instead joined the Western alliance system, NATO, and the European Union (EU).

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As a result of this transformation of Europe, NATO membership has grown from 16 countries to 28, with new NATO members expanding the alliance to the very borders of Russia. Gone are Warsaw Pact allies that previously provided “buffer space” between the Soviet Union and NATO. In all of this, Moscow sees the West, led by the United States, as guilty of deceitfully undermining Russia, causing the revolutions that brought down allied governments, and now being intent on bringing down Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime in Moscow.²

The leadership in Moscow deems this fracturing of the old “Soviet space” and its Cold War alliance system to be intolerable—leaving millions of ethnic Russians outside Russia’s borders and denying Russia its deserved special sphere of dominion in Europe.³ Indeed, President Putin has decried the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century.⁴ The newly independent peoples of Europe formerly under the Soviet thumb clearly do not agree, as is demonstrated by their decisions and sacrifices to escape first Soviet and now Russian domination. They rightly view moving to join Western institutions such as NATO and the EU as their sovereign choice and prerogative, and as helpful protection against Russian power and revanchism. Aspiring to this Westward-leaning independence was the great “crime” committed by Georgia and Ukraine that led to Russian military attack and territorial occupation in 2008 and 2014, respectively.

The fundamental reasons for the emerging threat of war in Europe are familiar. As was the case with Imperial Germany prior to World War I, Russia under Putin seeks its supposedly rightful “place in the sun” at the expense of its neighbors. Moscow now is willing to use force to overturn the post-Cold War East-West settlement, including numerous explicit threats of nuclear first use.

Russian leaders, for example, have said that Romania could be turned into “smoking ruins,”⁵ and that Poland will be in its “cross hairs.”⁶ Russia has expressed nuclear threats to smaller NATO countries, such as Denmark,⁷ and even to NATO partners such as Sweden.⁸ Correspondingly, President Putin has said publicly that he was ready to put Russian nuclear forces on alert when Russian forces occupied Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in 2014; Russian nuclear forces reportedly were put on alert during Russia’s 2008 military operations against Georgia.⁹

Western leaders, including some senior US military officers, have considered such developments to be implausible. As, Gen. James Cartwright, former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in the 2012 co-authored, *Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report*, “large-scale conflict” with Russia is “implausible,” and, “The risk of nuclear confrontation” with Russia “belongs to the past, not the future.” In addition, the “nuclear balance” is said not to be a “salient factor” in US-Russian relations. Evidence for such critical conclusions is that “several hundred experts” surveyed by the Council on Foreign Relations foresaw no Russian threat.¹⁰

Yet, Russian nuclear strategy indeed appears to focus on using the threat of limited nuclear first use to compel the West to stand down and accept Moscow’s forceful expansionism without a strong military response. For example, the Russian military occupation of Ukraine’s Crimea Peninsula was followed by Russian nuclear threats to deter any serious military efforts to restore Ukrainian territory.¹¹ By all appearances, this strategy has worked for Moscow.



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Indeed, Russian leaders, civilian and military, have for years called for precision, “super low-yield” nuclear weapons that could be employed in regional conflict.¹² The apparent purpose of these weapons, in part, is to deter or prevent Western recovery of territories lost to Russian military coercion and aggression. This Russian strategy is based on the notion that Moscow’s very limited use of small, “clean” nuclear weapons would deter or defeat a united Western military response, with such a limited level of destruction that NATO would not be willing to escalate the war further.¹³ This appears to be Moscow’s strategy of nuclear coercion that corresponds to its expansionist goals.¹⁴

The inconvenient truth about contemporary Russian goals and strategy remain unwanted and beyond belief for many Western leaders. Indeed, the United States was still in the process of further reducing conventional forces in Europe in 2014.

Yet, by 2014, Moscow had twice forcibly changed borders in Europe for the first time since World War II. Russian leaders now use multiple coercive tools, including the threat of nuclear first use, to prevent neighbors from taking unwanted Westward steps, such as participating in the US-led ballistic missile defense program in Europe, or joining NATO or the EU. Moscow has had some success in this coercive campaign, including vis-à-vis Georgia and Ukraine, while Sweden has recently decided to stand back from its earlier expressed interest in NATO membership, citing the danger of the current nuclear threat environment as its reason for backing off.¹⁵ This Swedish decision may well lead Finland to stand back from NATO membership.¹⁶

This situation in the heart of Europe is a recipe for further confrontation and war. Russia sees itself as recovering its rightful place of primacy in Europe, now denied by a US-led coalition that supposedly wants to bring Russia to its knees. NATO, in turn, sees itself as compelled, reluctantly, to defend against a revanchist, reckless neighbor with a recent history of nuclear threats, military aggression and occupation. Article V of the NATO Treaty calls for members to treat an attack on one as an attack on all, but recent Russian successes and apparent relative NATO passivity may easily inspire Russian overconfidence and miscalculation.

Russia, of course, claims the justness of its cause, and some Western commentary certainly downplays Moscow’s threats.¹⁷ But, the great danger posed by Russia’s goals and strategy must be recognized: in its bid to overturn the existing order in Europe, Russia seeks to deny its neighbors and erstwhile allies the sovereign right to choose their own futures. And, Moscow employs coercive tools, military operations and nuclear first-use threats to help reestablish its dominion in Europe. Herein lies the basic cause of conflict.

In contrast, NATO strategy seeks to protect the territory and sovereignty of NATO states and manifestly has no designs on Russian territory. In short, Russia has placed its military, including its nuclear arsenal, in the service of Russian expansionism; NATO strategy is reluctantly defensive against this threat and the alliance has long sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons. These are profound differences.

What to do? As an alliance, NATO is much more powerful than Russia. Separately, however, NATO members bordering Russia are much weaker. The reasonable promise that a united NATO could eventually dislodge Russian forces after they have occupied allied territory is necessary but insufficient. Attempting to liberate a NATO ally after a Russian military *fait accompli* would likely see that ally and



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its neighbors suffer horrific destruction, and could lead to the dangerous escalation of war, including Russian nuclear first use.

NATO must instead prevent a Russian attack from taking place altogether by deterring any Russian expansion into NATO territory. President Putin appears to understand power, and thus may be deterrable.

To help deter Moscow, NATO must--on an alliance-wide basis--impress upon Russian leaders that any violation of NATO territory is intolerable and will be met swiftly by a powerful, united NATO military response capable of defending NATO territory. To wit, Russia must be denied its apparent preferred strategy: first taking Western territory rapidly and presenting the West with a military defeat, and then deterring a powerful, united NATO response by threatening the West with nuclear first use

Denying Russia its preferred strategy will be a challenge: at this point, according to serious analyses, Russian troops could militarily overrun Baltic capitals in 36 to 60 hours.¹⁸ If so, under the Russian threat of nuclear first use, NATO would have to launch a grinding counterattack to liberate NATO territory. Unless NATO is in a position to prevent such a Russian military *fait accompli*, it will be vulnerable to this extremely dangerous Russian strategy.

To counter this strategy, Moscow must also be denied any confidence that it has license to use nuclear escalation to deter NATO from defending NATO territory. NATO must fill this gap in its deterrent that Russian leaders apparently believe they can exploit. It is critical to impress Moscow with the deterring message that any Russian first use of nuclear weapons will carry the gravest risk of escalating to incalculable destruction for Russia and its leadership. Credible, limited nuclear response options may be essential for this purpose of deterring Russia's limited nuclear first use.

This is not a call for NATO nuclear "war-fighting" capabilities or a desire simply to mimic Russian strategy, as some have mistakenly charged.¹⁹ It is a call for those nuclear deterrence capabilities likely needed to fill a gap apparently perceived by Russian leaders, to include credible NATO limited nuclear response options.

Fortunately, the Obama Administration's modernization programs for US nuclear capabilities now underway should help fill this need, particularly including the B-61 bomb, Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA), and a new cruise missile (Long Range Stand Off—LRSO). These programs should go forward without further delay. Why? Because we should want to deter nuclear confrontation and war as the *highest priority* of our nuclear policy. Such a prioritization of US goals may seem painfully obvious, but would require a change in the priority established in the Obama Administration's 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review*, which instead places non-proliferation as the highest priority goal.²⁰

Critics will say that this is a return to Cold War thinking,²¹ and some recommend that the West should instead "do very little" in response.²² No, after decades of relative slumber, restoring the capabilities needed to deter Russia is the most prudent Western strategy in response to Moscow's expansionist goals, Westward military assaults and nuclear threats. These are the new post-Cold War realities and all of NATO now must step up to the task.



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