

PUTIN'S RUSSIA AND U.S. DEFENSE STRATEGY

Workshop Report

19-20 August 2015
Washington, DC



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WORKSHOP REPORT

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The workshop addressed two questions bearing on the development of U.S. and NATO strategy toward Russia. First, how has Russia framed the problem of deterring and defeating a conventionally superior nuclear-armed major power and its allies? Second, what should the United States and NATO do to strengthen their deterrence and defense postures? In exploring these challenges with a diverse group of experts, the workshop also sought to give impetus to a community of interest that should work collectively to ensure that defense planning is informed by a detailed understanding of contemporary Russian attitudes, doctrine, and capabilities.

In order to focus in depth on the deterrence challenge, the workshop did not undertake a comprehensive review of all the issues shaping Russia's relations with the west. A number of worthy and important questions were therefore not discussed in detail, including the genesis of the current confrontation with Russia, the full range of recent developments in Russian military capability and doctrine, Russian domestic politics, and how to integrate the military and non-military dimensions of national and international strategy toward Russia.

Summary

Russia's strategy for deterring and, if necessary, defeating NATO features a spectrum of non-military and military capabilities that would be mobilized with the goals of shaping the political and operational environment, prevailing in a local conflict, denying or disrupting a counterattack, and controlling a process of escalation. Some elements of this strategy have been on display in Ukraine, though a Russian attack against a NATO member would be a far more complex and risky test of Moscow's concept for conflict. Still, Russia has been developing, deploying, and exercising capabilities that would allow it to execute local military operations against NATO members that would be difficult to defeat or overturn quickly.

Russia's challenge to European security may result in a political atmosphere reminiscent of the Cold War, but responding to Russia's potential threat to NATO's eastern members does not

require a return to a Cold War military footing. It does, however, require NATO to develop a responsive strategy and supporting capabilities. Some of the needed capabilities for enhanced deterrence and defense exist, but beyond taking some initial steps to address the local military imbalance in the east, the Alliance has done little to develop a comprehensive strategy that would convey both resolve and enhanced preparedness to defend the sovereignty and independence of its members.

Such an effort will generate controversy in the Alliance given different perspectives on key issues related to strategy, resources, and capabilities and the sensitive nature of some matters (e.g., NATO's nuclear deterrent). Alliance leaders will need to navigate these challenges in order to ensure meaningful steps can be taken while maintaining political unity. Additionally, strengthening deterrence and defense in ways that make a difference may create risk. In the near-term, it may not be possible to adopt a more credible and capable posture without heightening tensions with Russia. Here, too, strong leadership will be needed both to mitigate risks and reassure publics.

The Alliance must also strengthen its institutional resources for coping with what may be a long period of confrontation or tense relations with Russia. Current deficits in intelligence, expertise, operational planning, analytic tools, and decisionmaking need to be narrowed.

The Russia Challenge and the Need for Strategic Perspective

The extended crisis in Ukraine has both clarified and clouded strategic assessments in the West about Russian behavior and how best to understand and counter it. Russia's actions in Ukraine underscore that the post-Cold War policy to integrate Russia into the international system and create a strategic partnership with Moscow is no longer realistic, and will remain unachievable for the foreseeable future. This moment of strategic clarity is one the North Atlantic alliance must use to recalibrate its political and military posture. But it must do so with an understanding that the Ukraine crisis is only a manifestation of a larger problem, and further does not represent the core security challenge posed by Moscow. The larger problem is that the Putin regime sees "integration" as defined by the West as fundamentally incompatible with its chosen form of governance and the political, economic and social system it seeks to establish (what some refer to as "Putinism"). Indeed, Putin sees the rules defining the international system as a threat not only to Russian interests but to his regime's very survival. It is this logic that conflates opposition to Russian policies and behavior with an active Western strategy to promote regime change. All local conflicts and assessments of Western intentions and capabilities are viewed through this lens. Thus, conflict in Eurasia (to include Ukraine) is viewed as part of an ongoing U.S. strategy to encircle, weaken and coerce Russia as a prelude to regime change.

Nor does the situation in Ukraine define NATO's core security problem. As important as Ukraine is, the Alliance must separate this problem from the more urgent and complex task of preparing for a possible Russian challenge to NATO's collective defense doctrine and Article 5 commitment. To do so requires understanding more than Moscow's tactics in Ukraine but also how Russia would approach the task of deterring and defeating NATO in a limited conflict on territory near its own borders. Russia has been thinking about this problem for many years, and

has developed doctrine and capability that could be applied to this task, should the need or opportunity arise. Russia's approach to this task is premised on an assessment of U.S. military power, NATO's preparedness and resolve, and the requirements to manage the risks of military action and a process of escalation using a range of conventional, unconventional, and nuclear capabilities. A responsive Western approach must likewise proceed from a careful analysis of Russia's strengths and weaknesses, the ways in which escalation dynamics could shape a local conventional conflict, and the integrated toolkit of capabilities required to underwrite deterrence and defense.

Beyond protecting the vital interests of our regional allies, there is more at stake. The global order and collective security structures that Moscow seems intent on challenging must also be defended. Russia's future is a key consideration, as well. Western strategy should not foreclose the possibility of restoring closer relations with a Russian government prepared to moderate its behavior and play a more constructive role in European and international security. That means avoiding actions that could permanently damage relations and maintaining links to those in Russia who may be important moderate forces in a future Russian regime (e.g., civil society, private business).

Russia's Military Strategy and Capabilities

How does Russia define its core military challenges today? First, Russian forces must be able to prevail in a local conventional conflict by creating a quick fait accompli and denying initial NATO efforts to overturn its position. This requires rapid mobility, employment of lethal heavy forces with air support, and the use of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities to rebuff early U.S./NATO efforts to intervene. Second, Russia must be able to deter or deny U.S. and NATO efforts to use standoff conventional strikes to defeat Russia locally and mobilize for large scale intervention. This requires capabilities that can deliver strikes to NATO's depth to achieve operational and strategic effects and pose a credible threat of escalation. Third, Russia must ensure strategic stability with the United States. This requires not only maintaining strategic nuclear parity to ensure a secure retaliatory capability, but also responses to existing and prospective U.S. ballistic missile defense and prompt global strike systems, which Moscow sees as potential threats to Russia's nuclear deterrent. This requires diplomatic, operational, and technological strategies to manage or mitigate the risks these systems are believed to pose.

Russia has been working on these challenges through a process of doctrinal and programmatic modernization that dates back to the turn of the century. The first two – regarding conventional conflict in Eurasia – actually have roots in the lessons learned from U.S. operations in Desert Storm, but received their strongest impetus from the assessments made of NATO's air war over Kosovo in the late 1990s. These assessments envisioned unmatched U.S. unilateralism advancing "color revolutions" and other regional security goals through mastery of the revolution in military affairs (RMA) – uncontested power projection and ISR, automated command and control, and standoff precision strikes ("contactless war"). The Kosovo assessments in particular highlighted the role of precision strike aerospace campaigns and "massive information

wars” in achieving political aims, suggesting such an approach could be directed against Russian vital interests in Chechnya and by extension in other countries near Russia’s borders.

The military reform process that has followed represents a serious reconsideration of modern conflict that has accounted for the innovations of the RMA and acknowledged the obsolescence of the Soviet model. Organization and training have emphasized brigade-level combined arms operations, and the force has become lighter and more mobile, lethal and professional. Tactical nuclear weapons have been modernized as a means to preserve credible escalation options, and lessons from domestic information operations have been integrated into military doctrine. The goal has been to strengthen defense of the homeland and create sustainable local military advantage that would allow Russia to “win without fighting” – by projecting power rapidly to its periphery and denying NATO the ability to achieve decisive effects using long-range precision strikes.

Despite some continuing problem areas (e.g., C4ISR), most Western experts believe that Russia has made significant strides in developing the capability to use force effectively on its periphery and many open source analyses conclude that Russia today could invade one or more Baltic states and within days create a fait accompli that would be difficult and costly for NATO forces to overturn. Moscow might not have plans in place to act against a NATO member – something that would carry great risk for Russia – but at the least it seems prepared to exploit opportunistically a crisis that creates a pretext for political interference and an opening for military action that would strengthen its own position and weaken NATO’s.

In this type of local conflict, Russia could be expected to issue direct or indirect nuclear threats as a way to intimidate target countries and convey risk to other NATO governments. Additionally, non-military elements of power – political, informational, economic, intelligence – would be employed with varying degrees of ambiguity and deniability to shape the environment and set conditions for (or complement) more traditional military operations. This approach has its roots in the 2009 military strategy, which calls for “mobilizing the state” to support conflict in multiple domains. In this way, Russia’s approach to prevailing against NATO in a local conflict envisions the use of “soft power” to enhance the prospects for achieving its strategic goals and deterring a NATO response. Both nuclear saber-rattling and the use of soft power tactics are designed in part to paralyze Alliance decision-making – the former by instilling caution and fear, the latter by blurring the distinction between NATO’s crisis management and collective defense missions.

How would Moscow seek to deter or deny U.S. and NATO efforts to mount a major counter-attack? It would be a critical Russian objective to use cyber, space and theater-range strike systems to prevent opposing forces from mobilizing and “making contact.” This means disrupting the build-up and movement of NATO heavy ground forces and degrading the ability of the United States to bring its full “reconnaissance strike” capability to bear on Russian forces. Cyber operations would be employed to mask the true nature of Russian aggression in order to complicate Alliance deliberations, impose costs on NATO countries (including through attacks on non-military targets), and degrade key military preparations and capabilities. It is by now

clear that Russia possesses a significant capability to intrude into American and European networks, though not all experts agree on its ability to create severe and enduring cyber-effects.

Counter-space operations – more important to Russia than achieving its own space dominance – would be focused more directly on the U.S. reconnaissance strike complex, particularly the GPS network that enables the widespread use of inexpensive guided munitions. Given Russian resource limitations, the most viable course would be GPS jamming, a prominent feature of Russian operations in Ukraine. Successful GPS jamming would complicate and increase the risk and cost of U.S. and NATO strike operations. Russia’s space-based assets that could support counter-space operations are growing as investment increases, but are not fully mature.

Theater-range precision strike operations could include ballistic and cruise missiles as well as long-range aviation. The Iskander-M ballistic missiles provide Russia with an advanced capability that when deployed in Kaliningrad could influence NATO planning by holding at risk important assets such as airbases. The same is true for new generation land-attack cruise missiles, both those unconstrained by treaty (i.e., sea-launched) and those believed to violate the INF Treaty. These systems may also be envisioned for use against key infrastructure targets, or for strikes intended to weaken NATO’s political will or signal Russian resolve and willingness to escalate.

Assuming this suite of cyber, counter-space and conventional precision-strike capabilities matures, Russia may choose to reduce its reliance on nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) as a counter to western high precision weaponry and the initial means to escalate its way of out of local conflict in which it may have suffered a setback. Russian military writings are placing greater emphasis on advanced non-nuclear capabilities as instruments of escalation management, suggesting the emergence of a “pre-nuclear” level of deterrence. But just how distinct or long this pre-nuclear phase might be is unclear. If Russia feels severely threatened, incentives to use nuclear weapons will be greater. Russia’s national security doctrine states that the use of nuclear weapons will only be contemplated when the existence of the state is at risk, but the fact is that under Putin an “existential threat” is one that threatens the survival of the *regime*. What Moscow perceives, rightly or wrongly, as preparations for a decapitating aerospace operation may well meet this definition. So might an imminent military defeat, given the likely political repercussions.

Accordingly, the threshold for nuclear use may be not be as high as the language of the doctrine suggests, and the risk of early – or earlier than expected – escalation by a Kremlin leadership feeling politically and militarily vulnerable must factor into western calculations. Certainly, nuclear weapons are central to Russian strategic thinking and nuclear doctrine is linked to Moscow’s larger political narrative. It is important to Moscow that the United States and NATO view Russia’s nuclear weapons as usable as these weapons are considered the ultimate guarantor of the regime. Even as Russia pursues non-nuclear strategic capabilities, the increasing emphasis on dual-capable systems (e.g., air- and sea-launched cruise missiles) suggests interest in the integration of conventional and nuclear operations and creates potential for additional escalation risk.

Escalation dynamics in a regional conflict could also be affected by Russian perceptions of the strategic nuclear balance and the viability of its strategic forces. Russia remains deeply concerned about the potential vulnerability of its ICBMs and SLBMs to U.S. global strike and missile defense systems and is taking operational steps and making a number of force-building investments to enhance their pre-launch and in-flight survivability. The impact of these measures remains to be seen. Continuing anxiety about U.S. ability to limit its second strike capability may not constrain Russian escalation options but rather could create an operational “use or lose” dynamic that leads Moscow to consider early use of nuclear weapons. In turn, a higher degree of confidence in its nuclear retaliatory capability could remove a constraint to consideration of escalation options at the sub-strategic level.

Recognizing the “New Normal” – and Keeping our Balance

In both Brussels and Washington, it has been many years since Russia was a focus of defense planning. No plausible pathway to conflict could be envisioned, and relations with Moscow were viewed largely through the lens of partnership and engagement, not deterrence. That has now changed for the foreseeable future. Russia’s behavior as well as its continuing capability development – especially in space, cyber, long-range strike, A2AD and tactical nuclear – has led defense planners to recognize the need for renewed focus on the possibility of confrontation and conflict with Moscow. For the Alliance, this is a sea change and requires acknowledging that Russia is in fact a potential adversary and that priorities, plans and capabilities must be reassessed accordingly. This touches the conventional, nuclear, and missile defense aspects of NATO’s posture, as well as emerging concerns about how Russia would seek to leverage the cyber and space domains in a crisis or war, reframing the question of what constitutes the “appropriate mix” of required NATO capabilities.

On both sides of the Atlantic leadership cadres and staffs lack the depth of knowledge of Russia that was commonplace during the Cold War. This contributes to uncertainty about Russia’s intentions. While many can now envision a plausible pathway to war, there is no consensus regarding whether Moscow has an intention, a strategy or a plan to create that pathway. Those closest to Russia geographically are understandably most anxious and believe that failing to consider the worst case scenario will make it more likely; a greater sense of urgency is therefore required to strengthen deterrence. Others believe Russia is not prepared to do more than coerce NATO members and understands the risks of more aggressive steps – but might seize an opportunity to test the Alliance’s resolve. Still others argue that there are simply too many unknowns regarding Russia’s plans or how far it is willing to go.

There is more consensus on the fact that Russia’s leaders appear to assume the worst about western intentions and capabilities, feel acutely vulnerable to presumed western schemes of regime change and disarming first strikes, and believe that “losing” a war to the United States and NATO is an unacceptable outcome that would threaten the survival of the current regime. The Alliance must bear this in mind as it reorients its thinking and planning to produce a strategy

responsive to the current challenge but balanced in the risks it assumes. A key question is: How to hedge credibly against the threat of aggression without stimulating the very actions one seeks to deter? Put differently, how to reassure Russia that NATO has no hostile intent toward it but is fully resolved to defend its members? Answering this question will require deliberation and judgment, but cannot become a source of paralysis. Similarly, NATO needs to find a way to take meaningful steps to influence Russia's calculations and sense of risk while maintaining its unity. Consensus "at 28" is challenging under the best of circumstances. In the current circumstance, differing threat perceptions and the difficulties associated with re-opening sensitive issues (e.g., the nuclear question) could create fault lines that work against unity. This will require careful management. Finally, the United States faces the challenge of reconciling its "rebalance to Asia" with the need to make more defense resources available to support European security than might have been anticipated a few years ago. In a constrained and highly competitive budget environment, leadership will need to ensure that the necessary commitment to the rebalance does not create a strategic imbalance in Eurasia.

Shaping the U.S. and NATO Response

Deterring Attacks on NATO Members

Leaving aside Moscow's intent, many western experts have concluded based on analysis and simulations that in strictly operational terms NATO today would have difficulty resisting a determined Russian invasion of one or more Baltic states. Russia would enjoy a significant advantage in overall combat power after a short period of mobilization, particularly in ground forces capable of moving and operating rapidly. Superior NATO air forces would not be able to overcome this advantage in the necessary timeframe largely due to Russia's advanced integrated air defense system (IADS). Degrading or defeating this system probably would require airstrikes on key components on Russian territory, which would carry significant escalation risk.

NATO's challenge is to develop the capability to deter this type of Russian operation, not necessarily to comprehensively defeat it. This will require stronger ground and air forces to reinforce existing rapid response units, defend NATO capitals, and confront Moscow with the prospect of a protracted, costly fight and thereby undermine its confidence that it can achieve a rapid fait accompli. An enhanced deterrence NATO posture could consist of three pre-positioned heavy armored brigade sets, sustainment and fire brigades, and short-range mobile air defenses for ground forces, supported by higher readiness heavy NATO reinforcement units. A significant American component to these forces would be required. Steps to better protect land lines of communication between Poland and the Baltics and improve long-range strike in a tough air defense environment will also be necessary. While this enhanced posture likely would not be able to prevent the loss of NATO territory, it would create a far less favorable operational environment for Russian forces and complicate Moscow's decision-making, thereby contributing to deterrence. Posture improvements along these lines probably could be achieved at reasonable cost.

Such an approach is not without challenges and risk. For example, pre-positioning heavy units forward could well be viewed in Moscow as highly provocative, not least because it would raise basic questions about the NATO-Russia Founding Act (assuming this remains in place).¹ Relying instead on an enhanced reinforcement posture would be less provocative but may do little to strengthen deterrence and assurance, and could have destabilizing effects in a crisis if the meaning behind major force movements were to be misunderstood.

Rethinking Missile Defense?

Despite persistent Russian assertions that NATO's ballistic missile defense project threatens its nuclear deterrent, serious analysis demonstrates this is not the case except under the extreme worst case assumptions favored by Russian analysts. Still, even though there is neither an intention nor a plan to reconfigure the program to protect against a large scale Russian attack, some western officials have made statements suggesting that in light of Russian behavior NATO needs to consider the role of BMD in deterring threats from Russia as well as the Middle East.

While such statements are likely to be interpreted in Moscow as validating its claim, they are not surprising to hear post-Ukraine and point to the possibility of leveraging existing and prospective elements of the European Phase Adaptive Approach (EPAA) in the kind of local conflict in NATO's East that now preoccupies western defense planners. In this operational context, BMD would focus on defeating Russian short-, medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles that would be used in operations to seize NATO territory and degrade U.S. and NATO mobilization and counter-strike capabilities. In this way, NATO would hope to eliminate lower end escalation options that might figure prominently in Moscow's thinking, including those involving Iskander missiles. What such an approach might mean in technical and operational terms for the EPAA would have to be assessed. The political question is whether the Alliance, as it reviews the appropriate mix of offensive and defensive forces, should state explicitly that missile defenses are prepared to serve in this role.

A second important question goes to growing Russian land-attack cruise missile capabilities. Other than the Iskander, Russia has preferentially invested in cruise missiles in light of the INF Treaty and NATO's BMD program, and as noted above these systems now figure prominently in the emerging "pre-nuclear" phase of deterrence. Assuming this trend continues, NATO at some point will need to consider the need for a broader conception of missile defense that directs investment toward protecting against advanced cruise missiles. Some argue this should be a high priority today, and that at least selective point defense against cruise missiles is possible using existing systems such as Patriot (PAC-3). Mounting area defenses would be more challenging as it requires deploying a large number of airborne sensors.

¹ Some analysts have suggested as a less provocative alternative the establishment of three multinational battalions, one in each of the Baltic states, reporting to a U.S.-led headquarters.

The Nuclear Dimension

NATO's current nuclear consensus is embodied in the 2010 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR), which considered a number of changes or innovations to NATO's nuclear posture but in the end coalesced around the status quo. As the security landscape changes, this status quo is being challenged in some quarters, and the Alliance will need to find a way to re-open these questions – though it must do so carefully given the political sensitivities surrounding the nuclear issue. The main consideration is whether and how to adapt NATO's declaratory stance, nuclear sharing arrangements, capabilities, operational plans, and training and exercises. At the direction of ministers, the Alliance has completed an assessment of the role of nuclear weapons in Russia's approach to conflict and is now weighing the implications not only for NATO's nuclear deterrent, but also for other aspects of NATO political and military planning. The segregation of the nuclear posture from other elements of NATO defense planning may have been appropriate in the past, but under new circumstances may work against maximizing NATO's deterrent potential and achieving greater coherence in planning and decisionmaking.

Given the prominent role of nuclear weapons in Russian thinking and Russia's apparent confidence that it can use limited nuclear strikes to "de-escalate" a conflict on its terms, many argue that there must be a visible nuclear dimension to NATO's effort to strengthen deterrence and a renewed commitment to nuclear deterrence following a period during which reduced reliance and disarmament enjoyed priority. In considering how this might be accomplished, current and future assessments of the nuclear posture will confront a number of questions. Some of these relate to declaratory policy and more broadly what the Alliance says about the value and role of nuclear weapons.

- Should NATO's public stance explicitly point to Russia and the threat it poses to alliance members as the object of NATO nuclear deterrence?
- Should declaratory policy be clearer and firmer regarding a nuclear response to a nuclear attack against NATO?
- What should declaratory policy be with respect to non-nuclear threats that could have strategic effects?

With respect to capabilities, the core question is whether a modernized force of dual-capable aircraft and American B61 bombs remains a credible deterrent to the threats now posed by Russia and in particular Russia's "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine. There is no consensus on this question. Some argue that the problem is principally one of resolve: the most important thing NATO must do is counter the perception in Moscow that the Alliance is psychologically unprepared to use nuclear weapons or politically impaired from deciding to do so. In considering the steps that could be taken to accomplish this, attempting to field improved or new capabilities is less critical and could be counter-productive by creating new political divisions. The DCA force, in this view, is sufficiently effective operationally, and indeed provides for a strong but measured response to Russia's limited use of nuclear weapons, assuming a

significant degradation of the Russian IADS network. The challenge is making Moscow believe this.

Others argue that conveying nuclear resolve to Moscow is not possible as long as many NATO capitals must believe the DCA force lacks operational utility. Thus it is essential to take visible steps to enhance the survivability, readiness, and operational planning associated with the force. In this view, greater credibility cannot be divorced from clearly improved capability. Still others argue that more significant changes are needed because even an enhanced DCA force does not offer a sufficiently robust response to a limited Russian nuclear strike and therefore stands to be irrelevant to an unfolding conflict, especially one in which NATO forces face a highly capable IADS threat. Among the alternatives suggested are air-launched cruise missiles delivered by U.S. B52s, a sea-based long-range standoff weapon, low-yield variants of existing ICBMs and SLBMs, and a new type of supersonic air-delivered weapon optimized to survive the challenging air defense environment. Some of these systems could raise escalation concerns.

Enhancing nuclear sharing arrangements might be a less controversial approach than seeking new capabilities. NATO could signal deterrence resolve by giving eastern members a larger role in the nuclear mission. Measures short of changing basing arrangements or DCA ownership could advance this goal, such as providing these members the opportunity for greater participation in operational planning, exercises, and conventional support to nuclear operations. But it is important to recognize that some of these countries have no experience with nuclear weapons and will need to be educated. Finally, there are questions about whether the institutional infrastructure supporting NATO's nuclear deterrent is fit for purpose, centered on concerns that existing intelligence, crisis management, and strategic communications capabilities would not perform well in a nuclear crisis.

Shadowing any debate that might emerge over possible changes to the nuclear posture is the difficulty in developing a consensus for change. NATO's nuclear posture cannot be cordoned off from scrutiny simply because it invites controversy, but realistic proposals for adapting nuclear forces will be those that provide for meaningful improvements to their deterrence and operational utility without causing undue strain on Alliance unity. It is best to avoid a bruising debate over possible changes that do not enjoy the support of a large majority of NATO governments. As always, active U.S. leadership will be critical to maintain unity and navigate the next set of nuclear policy deliberations in Alliance councils, both leading up to and following the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw. It is difficult to predict what the Alliance will do with respect to the DCA force. As in the past, the forces favoring inertia or inaction may prevail, especially if those most vulnerable to Russian coercion favor a principal focus on conventional posture improvements or if a number of member states shy away from a difficult debate on nuclear questions.

For their part, NATO's three independent nuclear states need to complete their respective modernization programs, reaffirm the importance of nuclear weapons in deterring and responding to Russian aggression, recognize that further arms control with Russia is not possible while Moscow stands in violation of earlier agreements, and develop a strategy to

counter the arguments of those promoting a legal ban on nuclear weapons based on the humanitarian consequences of their prospective use. Practical collaborative steps the three can take include joint exercises, joint responses to Russian nuclear saber-rattling, strengthening French participation in NATO nuclear planning activities, and working to ensure that the Warsaw Summit says something meaningful about NATO's nuclear deterrent.

Some Markers for the Way Ahead

In NATO

It is important to prepare visibly and effectively for the possibility of Russian aggression against a NATO member, even if the general view is that this is unlikely. Doing so is necessary to hedge against uncertainty in assessing Russian intentions, and to shape those intentions by sending a message that Article 5 is taken seriously. It is also a means to enhance Alliance solidarity at a time when there is uncertain support for defending member states subject to Russian pressure or attack. Accordingly, steps to strengthen deterrence and collective defense in NATO's east are a priority, and the adoption and early implementation of the Wales Summit commitments has made a positive start. More needs to be done to fully implement these commitments, bearing in mind that NATO's goal is to deter, not necessarily defeat in detail a possible Russian aggression. More can be done, as well, to help eastern members improve their capacity for internal defense and reduce their vulnerability to Russian coercion. Enhancing resilience, especially with respect to governance, Russian ethnic populations, energy, and cyber is something to which civil society and non-governmental organizations can make important contributions.

The discussion in NATO has not gone much beyond this point, and framing a more comprehensive program to shape long-term strategy and preparedness must be the focus of work between now and the 2016 Warsaw Summit. It will not be possible to avoid some tough questions and choices. Should Russia be named as an adversary of NATO, and what are the implications of doing so? Is a more robust reinforcement posture sufficient to strengthen deterrence, or is permanent forward basing needed – and how would this affect the NATO-Russia Founding Act and Moscow's attitudes and calculations? Are adaptations needed to NATO's nuclear posture and, if so, will their benefits outweigh the risks to Alliance unity? Is NATO's investment in ballistic missile defense optimized in light of threat developments or is a reassessment in order?

To the task of addressing these and related strategic, operational and doctrinal questions the United States and its European allies bring significant experience and resolve – but also important deficits. These deficits span intelligence, institutional expertise, leadership attention, decision-making processes, and research, analysis and modeling capabilities. Underinvestment in these areas has subjected the Alliance to surprise and left it playing catch-up. Narrowing these deficits will take time and require resources, but is not a luxury if the transatlantic community is to be better positioned to meet the challenge from Russia over the long-term.

With Russia

If the United States looks at Russia through the lens of ignorance, then Russia looks at the United States through the lens of hostility. To the degree this is true, it creates an inherent instability that could contribute to the outbreak of war and the unintended escalation of war, especially at a time when tensions are high and senior-level engagement is limited. Moscow believes that Washington actively pursues a policy of regime change and seeks a disarming first strike capability against Russia's nuclear deterrent. A better relationship is unlikely as long as Russia holds to these misconceptions. The challenge is that they appear to be deeply embedded in Moscow's mindset, and there are few obvious confidence-building or reassurance measures that seem likely to change their thinking but do not compromise important U.S. principles and equities. A Track 2 dialogue among non-governmental experts is one way to approach this, and consideration should be given to creating a very discrete dialogue with carefully selected participants whose goal would be to discuss practical steps the United States could take to reassure Russia – but also other difficult issues such as managing the risks of unintended escalation due to miscalculation in a crisis and developing approaches to mutual restraint.

Successful dialogues could help facilitate the resolution of important issues when conditions permit a return to more normal relations, and therefore are one way in which the west can leave the door open to improved ties with Russia. In the near-term, though, it may not be possible to strengthen transatlantic deterrence and defense without heightening tensions with Russia. The United States and its NATO allies must be prepared for this.

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