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Policy Brief

Trump, Putin and the Growing Risk of Military Escalation

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Introduction

This paper addresses the possibility that the present confrontation between Russia and the West will lead to a military clash. It briefly sets out developments in the United States, NATO and Russia and argues that the risk of such a clash should not be dismissed. It sketches the most dangerous escalation scenarios and proposes four practical measures to address the greatest risks, including proposals to improve flailing diplomatic processes, attend to the requirements of responsible crisis management and revive bilateral arms control measures.

The paper does not seek to be comprehensive but draws attention to a set of risks stemming from scenarios that deserve more systematic consideration than they appear to be receiving in Moscow and NATO capitals. The risk of war between Russia and NATO may now be greater than during the mature phase of the 20th century's Cold War.

US–Russia relations: from bad to worse

With the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States many predicted a new honeymoon in US-Russian relations. Some hoped that this would include deepening cooperation on counter-terrorism and a possible re-launch of bilateral arms control. Some feared the withdrawal of US sanctions against Russia and a US-Russia deal concluded to the detriment of European security, perhaps a "Yalta" style grand-bargain with agreed spheres of influence and little, if any, attention paid to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

Both these hopes and these fears appear to be receding. In their place, however, emerge questions about how to manage the dangers of a potentially new phase in a prolonged Russia-West confrontation.

As we will argue at several points in this analysis, this confrontation has become institutionally and politically entrenched. The domestic political costs of changing the current course look higher in Moscow and especially in Washington than of maintaining the present path. And there are familiar Cold War style dynamics of action and reaction that are likely to further deepen and entrench the divide.

If this is correct, prudent management of the risks would suggest that each side should give more attention to understanding the problem, monitoring the risks, stabilising interactions with the other side by increasing predictability, working out how more serious crisis would be managed, and possibly even engaging the other side on risk mitigation.

A new phase?

There is arguably a prevalent assumption in 'Old Europe', parts of Washington DC and possibly some quarters in Moscow that the dangers of the present confrontation will not grow worse, or even a sense that the worst is over.

Yet in the coming months we may see more than just the continuation of a 'new normal' of unsettling brinkmanship that the world began to grow accustomed to from 2014 to 2016. Developments in 2017 and the new state of confusion brought about by the resident of the White House carry the troubling possibility that the most disturbing features of the confrontation could return, with greater intensity and additional unpredictability.

Investigations into Russian interference in the US presidential election in 2016 and into contacts between members of Trump's entourage and Russian officials make it probable that US-Russian relations during President Trump's term in office have been permanently compromised.[1] The suspicion of collusion between the White House and the Kremlin is unlikely to recede and will add additional pressure on the US President and his beleaguered administration.

President Trump may still have hopes of developing a special personal relationship with President Putin. Some of Trump's officials may still wish to manage bilateral disagreements with Russia in a more structured way, such as through strategic stability talks. However, large parts of Congress and the US administration, including the Department of Defense and the intelligence agencies, are looking for opportunities to thwart Moscow's foreign and security policy aspirations and penalise Russia for what they understandably judge to be hostile Russian actions against the heart of US democracy.

It could be argued that this is merely a transitional phase in which a President with unconventional ideas is forced into a conventional, procrustean framework of US-Russia confrontation, in which 20th century-style Cold War stabilisation mechanisms could then begin to operate. But the evidence so far suggests otherwise. US policy looks set to be more consistently dysfunctional and schizophrenic under Trump than hitherto.

Less than six months into the Trump presidency, the relationship between Washington and Moscow has progressed from being moderately open – with positive overtures between the two presidents - to obliging – with the US President hosting Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Russian Ambassador Kislyak at the White House to discuss counter-terrorism efforts and how to tackle ISIS[2] – to adversarial.

In recent weeks, this deterioration has manifested itself in moves to broaden the scope of US sanctions against Russia[3], the threat of a military clash over Syria, and Russian planes once again buzzing US ships and reconnaissance aircraft in Europe.[4]

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1 There are also concerns and circumstantial evidence that similar active measures are being employed by Russia to disrupt the elections in European states.

2 The strange Oval Office meeting between Trump, Lavrov and Kislyak, The Washington Post, 10 May, 2017; https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/05/10/the-strange-oval-office-meeting-between-trump-lavrov-and-kislyak/?utm_term=.0acf54daa40e .

3 U.S Expands Russia Sanctions, Bloomberg News, 20 June 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-20/u-s-expands-russia-sanctions-as-trump-meets-ukrainian-president

4 Russia Warns U.S. as Risks Rise in Syria, The Wall Street Journal, 19 June, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-to-target-u-s-and-coalition-aircraft-over-syria-1497882794?mg=prod/accounts-wsj

In the midst of the tense relationship between the US and Russia, European allies remain confused over the new American administration's Europe policy. This is exemplified by the President's approach towards NATO. At the May 2017 NATO meeting, President Trump on the one hand over-rode the advice of his national security team in choosing not to re-affirm the US commitment to NATO's mutual defence clause, but on the other hand heavily criticised Allies for not meeting their defence spending obligations. This may have been internally consistent pressure on Allies but also sent mixed signals to Moscow.

Contrary to Trump's words about working for better relations with Moscow and his ambivalence about the NATO security guarantee, recent US actions suggest not only continuation of the deterrence policy initiated by the Obama administration after 2014, but actual strengthening of the US military commitment to Europe and its readiness to stand up to assertive Russian actions. For example, the budget for the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI),[5] which finances increased engagement of US forces in deterrence and reassurance operations in Central and Eastern Europe and training with US allies, is projected to increase from USD 3.4 billion in Fiscal Year 2017 to USD 4.7 billion in Fiscal Year 2018.[6]

In Washington, the President seems to be torn between a personal inclination to improve the relationship with Moscow and external pressure to implement a tough policy against it, one that he does not believe in. At the same time, parts of the US administration may ultimately assume that they cannot fully trust their Commander-in-Chief during a crisis involving Russia and seek ways to work around him. From the European perspective, reservations are growing over the consistency of US policy towards Russia.

Such dysfunctionality has a very different feel and dynamic from the pre-1989 West-Russia confrontation. It differs also from the 2014-2016 period of a fairly coherent US approach towards Russia and NATO. Currently, the credibility of US security guarantees has been diminished and the predictability of US actions has gone down. As a consequence, a uniquely high degree of uncertainty has been introduced into the Russia-NATO crisis.

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5 The European Reassurance Initiative is a US program which increases the American presence in Europe for NATO allies, initiated in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea.

6 C. Pellerin, 2018 Budget Request for European Reassurance Initiative Grows to $4,7 Billion, DoD News, 1June 2017, https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1199828/2018-budget-request-for-europe-an-reassurance-initiative-grows-to-47-billion/

NATO – Russia: status quo and prospects for 2017-18

This political uncertainty in US-Russian relations introduces a further complicating factor in an already tense and challenged military deterrence relationship between Russia and NATO.

The sharp deterioration of relations between NATO and Russia from 2013 had already caused both sides to readjust their doctrines, planning, command and control structures, logistics, deployments and exercises. In 2017, NATO and Moscow are continuing down the path of strengthening their defence and deterrence postures with each other in mind as adversaries.

Russia

Since 2008, Russia has introduced military reforms and pursued large-scale re-armament plans. Initiated long before intervention in Ukraine and activation of NATO's activities along its Eastern flank, these were initially intended to optimise the military structure and reorient the Russian army towards tackling local contingencies. Yet they became increasingly directed towards preparations for a massive confrontation with NATO, or a major state adversary. According to the latest SIPRI estimates, between 2007 and 2016, Russia increased its military expenditure by 87%.[7] Obtaining a full and accurate picture of current Russian military expenditures is difficult, but it appears that while pressure from the Finance Ministry and challenging conditions for the Russian economy stopped any major military spending increases in 2016-17, they did not reverse the previous trend.[8]

New or substantially modernised weapons systems are being introduced to all branches of the armed forces. These include improved air and missile defence and coastal defence systems, high-precision ballistic missiles, land and sea-based cruises missiles and long-range artillery. There have also been advances in command and control systems, UAV and electronic warfare. This improved military capability is usable in offensive operations against a technologically advanced opponent.[9] According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, the armed forces are on track to reach the goal of having 60% "modern" equipment throughout all branches of its armed forces.[10] Combat engagements in Ukraine and Syria have been used to test the performance of Russian armed forces as well as assess specific weapons

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7 Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2016, SIPRI Factsheet, April 2017, p. 2, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-world-military-expenditure-2016.pdf.

8 M. Galeotti, The reports of the death of the Russian defence budget have been greatly exaggerated, In Moscow's Shadow blog 17 March 2017, https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2017/03/17/the-reports-of-the-death-of-the-russian-defence-budget-have-been-greatly-exaggerated/

9 See e.g. K. Giles. Assessing Russia's reorganized and rearmed military, Task Force White Paper, May 2017, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853

10 R. McDermot, Moscow Pursues Enhanced Precision-Strike Capability, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor Vol. 14, Issue 1, 17 January 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-pursues-enhanced-precision-strike-capability/

systems.

Along with acquiring new conventional strike systems, Russia is progressing with refurbishing its strategic nuclear arsenal. Troublingly, Moscow has allegedly deployed new long range land-based cruise missiles which are capable of striking the whole European continent.[11] This would not only constitute a violation of the INF Treaty but would constitute a serious political challenge and a militarily significant development not only for the US, but also for European NATO allies and partners. Russia has continued strengthening its capabilities and reorganising its Western Military District, as well as its Baltic and Black Sea Fleets, pointing to NATO's increased activities as the rationale for its activities. This includes the introduction of new weapon systems as well as the re-introduction of divisions as more capable fighting units in the Western Military District.[12]

Finally, Russia has continued to increase the combat capabilities of its forces through intensified exercising focused on raising combat readiness and practicing rapid deployment over large distances. Large-scale unannounced (snap) exercises in the border areas are still being used for such purposes, despite the potential to increase tensions and misunderstandings with neighbouring countries. With respect to pre-announced exercises, major "Zapad 2017" drills will take place in September 2017 in Belarus and Western part of Russia. While the main part of the exercises in Belarus will most likely be limited in scale to around 13,000 troops, this may be accompanied by parallel snap exercises in neighbouring regions of Russia.

In short, Russia has contributed to a sense of West-Russia confrontation not just through its behaviours towards its neighbours, most recently Ukraine, and not just through military build-up over a period up to 2014 when NATO (including US) military force levels were falling in Europe, but through the introduction of disruptive new technologies and the increasingly visible structuring and exercising of its forces with NATO in mind as an adversary.

It could be argued by Moscow that Russia's greater military capability is a stabilising factor in the NATO-Russia deterrence relationship. But so far the effect appears to have been the opposite. All these capability developments, when coupled with lack of clarity about Russia's future intentions, are seen by NATO and some of Russia's European neighbours as increasingly destabilising, despite Russian insistence on their defensive character.[13]

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11 Robert Burns, US general says Russia has deployed banned missile, Associated Press, 8 March, 2017.

12 See e.g. A. M. Dyner, Russia beefs up military potential in the country's Western areas, Bulletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, 13 June 2016, https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=21937

13 D. Herzenhorn, NATO's senior military officer: Russia threat growing on all fronts, Politico, 26 June 2017, http://www.politico.eu/article/nato-general-petr-pavel-senior-military-officer-russia-threat-growing-on-all-fronts/

NATO

From 2015, most NATO countries have been increasing their military spending. Not all of these increases can be linked to tensions with Russia, but Russia and above all the Ukraine crisis has been a significant driver. The defence spending of European members and Canada increased by 3.3% in real terms between 2015 and 2016, and is projected to increase by 4.3% between 2016 and 2017.[14] In Washington, the US Administration sought a 10% increase in the defence budget for Fiscal Year 2018.

At NATO's Wales Summit and again at the Warsaw Summit in 2016, two years later, NATO members agreed to a series of measures to strengthen the Alliance's defence and deterrence posture as well as reassure allies on its eastern flank neighbouring Russia. All of the relevant decisions made at NATO's Wales Summit are now in place, as are most of the decisions from the Warsaw Summit. Implementation of the Readiness Action Plan agreed at Wales has been pressed forward and the brigade-size Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) or "Spearhead Force" is now operational. At Warsaw, allies agreed to enhance NATO's air, land and naval presence in the eastern and southern flanks. Units are now deployed in the Baltic and Black Sea regions as part of the Tailored Forward Presence in Romania[15] and Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP)[16] in the Baltic States and Poland. The NATO Response Force is being tripled in size as planned and all eight of the NATO Force Integration Units have now been established.

NATO and NATO allies have maintained the increase in the size and frequency of their exercises. In 2016 the number of exercises tripled to 246, compared to the previous year. In 2017, NATO and NATO allies will be conducting some of their largest exercises to date in the Baltic and Black Sea Region. These include Saber Guardian 2017 (SG17), an annual US led multinational exercise held in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, with 25,000 personnel from 23 allied and partner countries; the maritime exercise Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) in the Baltic Sea with 4000 troops from 12 allied and 2 non-NATO partner countries, Finland and Sweden; and the US-led multinational exercise Saber Strike 17 in the Baltic States and Poland with 11,000 troops from 26 nations, which exercises the eFP battle groups, among other tasks. [17] [18]

Major exercises have increased in size and scope to test and improve combat readiness as well as NATO's ability to rapidly reinforce during a crisis; to augment the US presence in Europe; and to support NATO allies neighbouring Russia by

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14 Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017), NATO Press Release PR/CP(2017) 111, 29 June 2017; http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_06/20170629_170629-pr2017-111-en.pdf

15 Boosting NATO's presence in the east and southeast, 29 June 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm?selectedLocale=en

16 At the Warsaw Summit NATO's members agreed, namely in Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with an enhanced forward presence (eFP) consisting of multinational forces led by the US, the UK, Canada and Germany in each of country respectively. These (eFP) battalions are now in place.

17 See e.g. : http://www.eur.army.mil/SaberStrike/

18 See: http://navaltoday.com/2017/05/26/saber-strike-17-kicks-off-in-latvia/

visibly demonstrating the strengthened Alliance deterrence and defence posture.

NATO ministers at the 2016 Warsaw Summit added cyberspace as an operational domain alongside air, sea and land, and committed to a Cyber Defence Pledge for member states to enhance their cyber defences. Cyber-attacks on NATO increased by 60% from 2016[19] and Russian officials publically admitted to increasing information warfare efforts.[20] NATO has therefore also begun incorporating cyber operations into its exercising. For the first time, in the bi-annual exercise Joint Warrior, which took place in March and April 2017, another cyber operation exercise, Information Warrior 17, was integrated into it and was intended to test "offensive and defensive cyber operations, influence operations, and Artificial Intelligence (AI)".[21]

NATO insists on the strictly defensive, restrained and reactive character of these measures. But Russia points to them, and also to emerging US technologies that Russia sees as disruptive, as justification for the development of its own military potential.[22]

Possible paths to a military escalation

As described earlier, the attention paid to managing the prolonged confrontation is limited. Yet, it should be highlighted that the dangers of escalation have not been completely ignored. In 2016 and in early 2017 there were increased efforts - predominantly initiated by NATO but reciprocated at times by Russia - to improve communication and transparency as well as reduce military risks. Despite all practical cooperation being formally suspended in April 2014, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) met in 2016 in April, July and December and the NATO Secretary General met with the Russian Foreign Minister twice that year. The Deputy Secretary General maintained contact with the Russian Ambassador to NATO and military communication channels have enabled discussion, even if limited, between NATO and Russian militaries. [23]

It can be assumed that neither side wants a military conflict which, after all, could escalate to the level of a nuclear exchange. Yet, there are scenarios which could lead to war. While the probability of this may still be low, the risks are high enough to make it worth assessing which of the scenarios are most likely, and thus most important to address.

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19 Sam Jones, Russia mobilises an elite band of cyber warriors, Financial Times , 23 February, 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/f41e1dc4-ef83-11e6-ba01-119a44939bb6

20 Russian military admits significant cyber war effort, BBC News, 23 February 2017, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-39062663

21 G. Allison, Royal Navy to kick off "Information Warrior" exercise in March, 16 February 2017, https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/royal-navy-kick-off-information-warrior-exercise-march/

22 Defence chief notes Russia's western border heating up as NATO acticvity surges, TASS news, 21 June 2017, http://tass.com/defense/952592

23 Annual report of NATO Secretary General, 2016, p. 20, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2017_03/20170313_SG_AnnualReport_2016_en.pdf

Unintentional clash

An accidental escalation in the NATO-Russia context would most probably stem from an incident involving the armed forces of both sides resulting in either military or civilian casualties. Not intended or planned in advance, an accident could result from the failure of equipment, human error, deficiencies in the command and control system, or the combination of all of these factors. For instance, a fighter jet conducting manoeuvres in close proximity to the other side's surveillance aircraft in international airspace could accidently crash into it either because of a mistake made by the pilot or mechanical failure. In the current climate of mistrust, it would be doubtful that the side which suffered casualties would simply accept apologies without resorting to retaliation. At the same time, it remains unlikely that an incident or accident would lead directly to the initiation of hostilities, unless it was seen as a useful pretext for a previously planned operation.

An inadvertent escalation could emerge when deliberate actions end up being unintentionally escalatory because of the lack of understanding or clarity on how they would be interpreted by the other side.[24] This danger of failing to properly read deterrence signalling and observe the other side's red lines becomes especially severe in the midst of increased propaganda, "fake news" and sabre-rattling rhetoric, which might cause the actual signal to be missed or ignored.

For example, during a period of high tension, increasing the combat readiness level of Russian long-range air defences and other A2AD assets in the Baltic or Black sea area, or staging major exercises - by either the Russian or NATO side - with new or unexpected characteristics that could be read as an offensive scenario, could be interpreted as preparation for an attack or the first stage of an attack.[25]

An inadvertent clash is made all the more likely by the inadequacy of reliable crisis communication channels, as well as worst-case assumptions about the mode of conducting military operations by the potential opponent. A number of analyses of contemporary Russian military doctrine note its emphasis on speed of operations, strategic and tactical surprise, as well as the early use of overwhelming force. This increases the pressure on NATO to adopt "a warfighting mind-set"[26], speeding up its decision-making and delegating the authority to react to the military command. Such worst-case assumptions may also increase the pressure for early escalation during a crisis to prevent the other side from achieving a rapid victory.

Intentional clash

Given both Russia's and NATO's military might, a decision to initiate a military clash would be a high-risk move and not one to be taken lightly. The possibility of escalation

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24 For an overview of the typology and approaches to escalation, adopted for the paper, see: F. Morgan et alia, Dangerous Thresholds. Managing Escalation in the 21st Century, RAND Project Air Force, 2008, pp. 7 - 33.

25 See e.g. T. Kowalik, D. Jankowski, The dangerous tool of Russian military exercises, CEPA Paper, 9 May 2017, http://cepa.org/EuropesEdge/The-dangerous-tool-of-Russian-military-exercises

26 I. Brzezinski, T. Valasek, Reanimating NATO's Warfighting Mindset: Eight Steps to Increase the Alliance's Political-Military Agility, GLOBSEC NATO Adaptation Initiative Paper One, April 2017.

to a nuclear exchange would make the initiation of hostilities with broad objectives, such as regime change in Russia or any NATO state, complete military defeat of the other side, or the occupation of large parts of each other's territory, extremely dangerous to one's own survival and therefore unlikely.

Yet, initiating a clash to serve a narrow objective and avoid provoking an all-out conflict could nevertheless be envisaged. In Russia's case, some western analyses postulate a scenario where Russia conducts a single military move limited in scope or intensity - *a coup de main* - intended to break NATO cohesion or establish new facts on the ground. The operation would then be paused and a defensive posture adopted in the expectation that the other side would either accept the *fait accompli* or be forced to raise the stakes. Another possible scenario, for a NATO country as well as Russia, might be a strike against the personnel of the rival side in a third country, over the high seas, or in international airspace. This could serve as a-shot-across-the-bow warning of the imminent crossing of a "red line", a punishment for actions, or a way to alter the decision-making calculus during a bilateral crisis.[27]

However, the probability of initiating an intentional clash can still be assessed as low. The inability to control escalation once hostilities commence and the high stakes involved in any Russia-NATO clash would act as a strong disincentive to starting such hostilities.

Mixed scenarios

Beyond the unintentional/intentional dichotomy, there are a number of scenarios where the turn of events during an ongoing crisis could force one side to decide to start military hostilities. While the use of force would not be pre-planned and might not feature as an option before or during the early stages of a crisis, it could emerge as the only "logical" choice later, given the high stakes and the inadequacy of other means used to change the course of events. Shifts to a military phase could also be forced by the poorly-understood consequences of using particular technologies (for example, cyber) or by the unforeseen actions of third parties, be it states, non-state actors or proxies.

One such scenario might be a cross-domain conflagration where a confrontation which was initially non-military by nature, for example the employment of 'hybrid' measures of coercion or activities in cyberspace, spills over into the military domain.

Another mixed scenario could be the involvement of both sides in a conflict on the territory of a third party resulting in a direct military clash. This might arise as a consequence of the "snowball" effect of increasing support for different players in a conflict. Progressions from political commitments, to providing weapons and equipment, to involving Special Forces or trainers, to having a limited military presence on the ground, can all make a decision to counter the other side's actions in the contested area by military means easier to make. Such escalations could be orchestrated by local actors who hoped to gain from entangling a major power in a conflict on their side. Many of these dynamics are already at play in the complex Syrian crisis, with Russia supporting the Assad regime and the US providing support

27 The Turkish shoot-down of Russian aircraft in 2015 may be considered an example of such an approach.

for Syrian rebels. As mentioned in a recent European Leadership Network report, there are also scenarios in which both Russia and NATO find itself engaged in an acute security crisis in the common neighbourhood area.[28]

These mixed scenarios require special attention, particularly given that what some Western observers see as unpredictable and impulsive decision making by President Putin has now been matched by unpredictable and seemingly impulsive US foreign policy decision-making during the early stages of the Donald Trump presidency.

Recommendations

The underlying problem is that Russian and Western perceptions of security fundamentally differ and are growing further apart. These conflicting security perceptions along with the ratcheting up of defensive measures suggest that the probability of war in Europe is now greater than it was during the mature phases of the Cold War. The downturn in bilateral US-Russia relations and the unpredictable character of both administrations is adding to this probability.

As outlined above and in previous European Leadership Network research papers,[29] the increase of military activities in the Euro-Atlantic space has the potential develop into situations where incidents, risk-taking or miscalculation could lead to military clashes between the two nuclear armed states of the US and Russia or a nuclear armed Russia and a nuclear NATO. Changes to military doctrines and postures seem to increase the potential for uncontrolled escalation at a time when most formal and informal channels of communication have closed down.

Full consideration of the steps that should be taken to reverse the growing risk of military escalations would require a much longer paper. This one has merely sought to describe the risk and suggest that all sides need to take it more seriously.

But it is not difficult to identify the general areas requiring attention. If these risks are to be reduced, the US and Russia, as well as NATO and Russia will need to learn to better interpret each other's actions and respond appropriately. Separately and preferably jointly, the US and Russia and NATO and Russia will need more seriously to consider crisis management mechanisms and methods for de-escalation. Clear and concrete risk reduction measures will need to be pursued, military doctrines and postures re-examined, and current arms control measures preserved. Ideally, existing channels of disciplined dialogue should be re-opened or new channels or dialogue should be established.

The recommendations below offer a few specific, early steps that might be taken to help to mitigate the risks. They include measures which, at the very least, help to build understanding, if not trust and possible de-escalation pathways.

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28 See: I. Kearns, T. Frear, Defusing future crises in the shared neighbourhood: Can a clash between the West and Russian be prevented?, ELN Report, March 2017; http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/defusing-future-crises-in-the-shared-neighbourhood-can-a-clash-between-the-west-and-russia-be-prevented_4597.html

29 For more see - http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/publications_41.html

1. Limiting the potential for unintended escalation in Syria

The United States and Russia are actively involved militarily and politically in the Syrian civil war. Over the past several months, forces from both sides as well as other actors have been operating in closer proximity in southern and eastern Syria to defeat ISIS and reclaim territory. There have been increases in military confrontations between US-backed forces, Russian and Iranian-backed militias and Syrian regime forces. In June 2017, the US shot down two armed Syrian government warplanes and two Iranian-backed militias' drones. In retaliation, the Russian buzzed a US reconnaissance aircraft operating around the Baltic Sea. At least three incidents have taken place where US aircraft have flown close to Syrian government and Iranian backed militias.

With the uptick in military activity, growing number of players and a shrinking battlefield, as set out in the mixed scenario example earlier, there is a danger that an accident, incident, provocation or unauthorised action could spark a direct military confrontation between the powers involved. With limited communication channels currently in place this is dangerous prospect which could result in US and Russian forces going head to head.

All state parties involved in the Syrian conflict should avoid actions that could be interpreted as a direct attack on the other's forces. There should be direct and regular contact to avoid unintended escalation. The US and Russia should maintain their bilateral de-confliction agreement to manage activity in Syrian airspace. Russian threats to suspend or withdraw from the agreement should not be carried through and further threats to do so should not be made by the top of the Russian leadership.

2. Establish a NATO-Russia Military Crisis Management Group to pursue military confidence and security building measures

In an attempt to prevent the escalation scenarios, as laid out earlier, from occuring one approach would be to establish a NATO-Russia Military Crisis Management Group tasked with pursuing military confidence and security building measures. Since the greatest risk in miscalculation arises from a lack of transparency and predictability, as well as potential misreading of the actions of the other side, addressing the gap in these areas offers a practical means of mitigating these dangers.

At present there is no effective mechanism for NATO and Russian defence ministry officials and militaries to jointly assess military risks; communicate plans and intentions; raise concerns; develop approaches for avoiding incidents; jointly work on reducing military risks; and increase confidence and predictability. With the suspension of practical cooperation at the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2014, NRC meetings at Ambassadorial level and occasional briefings are not sufficient to address these issues effectively and meaningfully.

Setting up a NATO-Russia Military Crisis Management Group[30] would establish a

30 As recommended recently in an open letter by Des Browne, Sam Nunn, Igor Ivanov and Wolfgang Ischinger. However the Browne-Ischinger-Ivanov proposal does not offer the detail included in the proposal outlined here. See: http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/open-letter-to-president-donald-trump-and-president-vladimir-putin_4885.html

practical dialogue mechanism to do this. This joint NATO-Russia initiative could be comprised of NATO and Russia military officials led by Chairman of the NATO Military Committee or the Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR) and the Russian Chief of the General Staff and would focus on risk-reduction, transparency and confidence-building measures.

With NATO-Russia relations the worst since the end of the Cold War, a forum of this format is required and should be set up outside the NRC format and so not to contravene the suspension of the NRC and not signal a return to "business as usual". A joint initiative of this nature would help to reduce the risk of a military conflict by establishing a channel of dialogue between the opposing militaries to help stabilise the current confrontation and offer a mechanism for managing risks.

3. Joint presidential declaration and bilateral nuclear risk reduction plan[31]

The lack of transparency and the ambiguity of intent in both the White House's and Kremlin's decision-making may give rise to instability across the Euro-Atlantic region. As set out earlier, this stems from confusion over the US administration's policy towards Europe and Russia, which at present lacks predictability, diminishing the credibility of US security guarantees to its European allies. However modest expectations should be applied to what President Trump is able to do or suggest to President Putin without generating an uproar and pushback within the US and among its allies.

Broadly acceptable efforts to reduce the risk of instability would include a Joint US-Russia Presidential Declaration that "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought", emulating the 1985 statement by Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev.

A joint statement by Presidents Putin and Trump would send a clear message to each other and the rest of the world that, even during a crisis in relations, both leaders recognize that they have a responsibility to prevent nuclear disaster. Both Presidents could also initiate talks on a return to the pursuit of bilateral arms control. A constructive new measure with which to start discussions of new steps would be agreement to remove a significant number of their strategic nuclear forces off prompt-launch status.

4. Undertaking efforts in good faith to preserving existing bilateral arms control agreements, including through strategic stability talks

Two important US-Russia bilateral nuclear arms control agreements, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), are in danger of collapse. If the INF Special Verification Commission fails to resolve the INF dispute and one side or the other declares the Treaty to be at an end, the repercussions in Washington and possibly in Moscow could make it politically very difficult to extend and then renew New START. If that comes to pass, it would be the first time in almost 50 years when there is no legal mechanism to limit the growth of the nuclear forces of the world's two largest nuclear powers. Dialogue between the US and Russia, in the form of the strategic stability talks agreed but not started between US Secretary of State Tillerson and

31 *ibid*

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, should be re-established to manage and prevent the demise of these bilateral arms control treaties, particularly if the INF Special Verification Commission fails to resolve the INF dispute. At a minimum, extending the New START treaty should be a priority.

Conclusion

It seems increasingly likely that the Russia-West confrontation will be prolonged. As we have argued throughout this paper, the confrontation has become institutionally and politically entrenched. Rising budgets are seductive to military establishments. The domestic political costs of changing course look higher than of maintaining the present path. There are deep roots to the confrontation from the 1990s and the last decade or more of rising mutual wariness and disillusionment.

The implications go beyond the risks in the present confrontation. At least in some Western capitals, after 25 years of expeditionary wars of choice, there is a prevalent mind-set that confrontation with Russia is a passing phase that can be tackled in an *ad hoc* fashion. Yet if the confrontation between nuclear Russia and the nuclear West is prolonged, it should be managed better.

This is, at best, happening only patchily. The two sides are far from monolithic but both are for the time being more focused on scoring points. NATO cannot agree a Russia strategy. It struggles to 'read' Russia, and it is debatable how well Moscow 'reads' NATO. NATO's signalling still lacks coherence and if Russia's signalling is intended either to reassure or divide its potential adversaries, it is having the opposite effect. Although NATO Ministers are believed to have discussed crisis management scenarios, knowledge and skills for West-Russia crisis management are rudimentary in many NATO capitals. There is little evidence that either side has considered de-escalation pathways. And although there has been some worthwhile dialogue between Moscow and major Western capitals – intensively so over Ukraine – it does not appear to have addressed the dangers of prolonged confrontation.

Institutional agreements and confidence building measures which in the past have helped to preserve Europe's security have been suspended or eroded due to the decline in Russia-West relations. Managing the fractious relations between the US, Russia and NATO requires more attention to crisis management, risk reduction, the maintenance of critical arms control agreements and the preservation of current and establishment of new channels of dialogue between the militaries and governments concerned.

There are a range of dangerous escalation scenarios set out in this paper which could lead to a military clash between NATO, Russian, US and other state forces. Military brinkmanship, and uncertainty over the decision-making calculus of both Presidents Trump and Putin makes it all the more important that sustained efforts are undertaken to reduce the present risks.

The recommendations included in this paper, if implemented, would work to reduce tensions and stabilise, if not improve, Russia-West relations. Priority should be given to limiting the potential for a military escalation between the world's two largest nuclear powers. This would serve not only to stabilise US-Russia and Russia-NATO relations but also enhance the security of all states in the Euro-Atlantic region.

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