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Position Paper III

Avoiding War in Europe: how to reduce the risk of a military encounter between Russia and NATO

Task Force on Cooperation in Greater Europe

About the Task Force

The Task Force brings forward proposals to allow all countries of the region to decisively break with the costly legacy of the Cold War and focus more effectively on meeting the emerging political, economic, and security challenges of the 21st century. It addresses the causes of current levels of mistrust between key countries and actors in the region, has trust-building as a central theme in its deliberations, and sets out a rationale and vision for a cooperative Greater Europe and a range of practical steps necessary to move the international relations of the continent in that direction.

The Task Force is supported by, and draws on, independent analytical work by the European Leadership Network (ELN), the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), and the International Strategic Research Organisation in Ankara (USAK). The Task Force is made possible by generous support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI).

The Task Force has the following confirmed membership:

Adam Daniel Rotfeld, former Foreign Minister, (Poland) (Task Force Co-Chair);

Igor S. Ivanov, former Foreign Minister, President, Russian International Affairs Council, Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Russia) (Task Force Co-Chair);

Des Browne, former Defence Secretary (UK) (Task Force Co-Chair);

Özdem Sanberk, Director of the International Strategic Research Organisation, former Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Turkey) (Task Force Co-Chair);

Ana Palacio, former Foreign Minister (Spain);

Paul Quilès, former Defence Minister (France);

Hervé Morin, former Defense Minister and Leader of the New Center party (France);

Malcolm Rifkind, former Foreign and Defence Secretary (UK);

Volker Ruehe, former Defence Minister (Germany);

Tarja Cronberg, Former Member of the European Parliament and former Director of the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (Finland);

Hikmet Cetin, former Foreign Minister (Turkey);

Tony Brenton, former Ambassador to Russia (UK);

Vyacheslav I. Trubnikov, former Director, Russian Foreign Intelligence, General (Rtd) and former Ambassador (Russia);

Igor Yu. Yurgens, Chairman of the Board of the Institute of Contemporary Development, Vice President of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (Russia);

Anatoliy Adamishin, former Deputy Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the UK, President of the Association of Euro-Atlantic Cooperation, and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation (Russia);

Vitaly V. Zhurkin, Director Emeritus of the RAS Institute of Europe, RAS Full Member (Russia).

Ruslan S. Grinberg, Director of RAS Institute of Economics, Corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Russia);

Alexei Gromyko, Director of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IE RAS) (Russia);

Anatoliy Torkunov, Rector of Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the RF MFA, RAS Full Member, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation (Russia);

Georgy Mamedov, former Ambassador to Canada and former Adviser to President Putin (Russia);

Mikhail Margelov, Vice President of Transneft, former Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian Federation Council (Russia).

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Context

We all know that over the last 18 months the relationship between Russia and the West has deteriorated considerably. There has been a fundamental break-down of trust amid divergent and, at this point, totally incompatible accounts of what has happened in Ukraine and why. Long-standing concerns and differences over other issues, such as missile defence, the enlargement of NATO, regimes designed to build confidence on deployments of conventional military forces in Europe and non-strategic nuclear weapons have become more acute as a result. The economic relationship between Russia and the rest of Europe is also beginning to disintegrate due to the sanctions process, and many commentators in both Russia and the West now openly speculate about a new Cold War.

One feature of the new landscape has been the increase in close military encounters between Russian and NATO military forces and between Russian military forces and those of Sweden and Finland. As with everything else, there is a dispute over what exactly is happening and why but there is little disputing that both increased military activity and closer proximity of forces is a reality.

The European Leadership Network has recorded 66 incidents in the period since March 2014.¹ Most of these, around 50, were thought to have been 'near routine' but some were more serious and three were classified as high risk. The overall incidents are much higher of course. NATO has reported that it conducted over 400 intercepts of Russian aircraft in 2014, four times higher than the number of intercepts in 2013. Russia has stated publicly that it counted twice as many flights of NATO tactical aircraft near its borders in 2014, more than 3000, than in 2013. Sweden and Finland have reported a number of intercepts of Russian aircraft close to their airspace, and each country had to search the territorial waters for mysterious 'underwater objects' at least once during the last 12 months.

Russia has increased the number and size of its military exercises, including no-prior-notification snap exercises, some of them in the Western Military District and therefore

1 Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014, European Leadership Network, November 2014, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/dangerous-brinkmanship-close-military-encounters-between-russia-and-the-west-in-2014_2101.html
Russia West Dangerous Brinkmanship Continues, European Leadership Network, March 2015, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/russia--west-dangerous-brinkmanship-continues-_2529.html

close to NATO territory. During the course of the current crisis, Russian officials and experts have confirmed increased activity on the part of the Russian air force, including use of surveillance aircraft and long-range strategic aviation. Russia has also deployed additional aircraft, ships, air defence and anti-ship missile units in Crimea.

NATO has reacted to the deteriorating situation in Central and Eastern Europe by increasing its military footprint along the eastern flank of the Alliance. It has increased the scale of the Baltic Air Policing mission. It has moved more troops into that region on a rotational basis, is augmenting its command structure in the region and discusses pre-positioning of equipment. According to official NATO data, 162 exercises were conducted in 2014 under NATO's Military Training and Exercise Programme – double the number of exercises initially planned. Together with 40 additional nation-led exercises; these were part of NATO's wider effort to demonstrate resolve and re-assurance of Allies in the context of the current crisis.

Regarding both Russia and NATO activities, we see continuation of these trends into 2015.²

Challenge

As a group, the members of this Task Force have not undertaken a collective assessment of what is motivating these specific military deployments and even if we did, it is unlikely that we would be able to agree on a single account of what is going on.

However, we do agree on two important observations. First, that Russia and NATO both seem to see the new deployments and increased focus on exercises as necessary corrections of their previous military posture. Each side is convinced that its actions are justified by the negative changes in their security environment. Second, an action-reaction cycle is now in play that will be difficult to stop.

There are some who say that this increase of tensions is manageable and that the professional militaries of all sides will ensure that nothing untoward happens. This may well be true but we are dealing here, for the most part, with military relations and encounters between a nuclear armed state on one hand and a nuclear armed alliance on the other, taking place in a context of heightened mistrust and significant tension between the two sides. History is littered with examples of international crises and tensions that developed a momentum of their own and resulted in conflict even when no one side intended it. We are not necessarily in a dynamic like that of Europe in 1914 but it is a particularly sanguine policy-maker who

2 The Anatomy of a Russian Exercise & The Anatomy of a NATO Exercise, Thomas Frear, European Leadership Network, August 2015, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/anatomy-of-a-russian-exercise_2914.html, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/anatomy-of-a-nato-exercise_2962.html

would not wish to learn as many lessons as possible from our collective history on this continent and do whatever is possible to ensure things do not slide out of control.

In our view, **the situation is ripe with potential for either dangerous miscalculation or an accident** that could trigger a further worsening of the crisis or even a direct military confrontation between Russia and the West.

In July 2014 many members of this Task Force already noted the danger in the developing situation and called for, among other things, all sides to improve the level of military-to-military communication and to exercise political and military restraint within their chains of command, rules of military engagement and where possible, over the actions of their relevant friends and allies.

NATO has since explicitly confirmed that the communication links between NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), the Head of the NATO Military Committee and the Head of the Russian General Staff are active and available 24/7. Avoidance of dangerous incidents has been discussed in-depth within NATO and has also been raised in recent meetings between the NATO Secretary-General and Russia's Permanent Representative to NATO and Minister of Foreign Affairs. We welcome these developments but believe more still needs to be done.

Our proposal

In our view, the NATO-Russia Council should be convened urgently to discuss a possible Memorandum of Understanding between NATO and the Russian Federation on the Rules of Behaviour for the Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters between the two sides. Such an agreement was signed between the United States and China in late 2014 to, 'strengthen adherence to existing international law and norms, to improve operational safety at sea and in the air, to enhance mutual trust, and to develop a new model of military to military relations between the two sides.'³ A multilateral NATO-Russia agreement can be pursued in parallel to any bilateral negotiations on similar arrangements between Russia and the NATO Member States or partners.

This US-China agreement sets out the principles and procedures of communication that should be observed during encounters between military vessels and aircraft, and requires each side to give timely hazard warnings if military exercises and live weapons firing

3 Memorandum of Understanding Between the Department of Defence of the United States of America and the Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China Regarding the Rules of Behaviour for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters, Section 1, p.2. Available at: http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/141112_MemorandumOfUnderstandingRegardingRules.pdf

are to take place in a vicinity where the military vessels and aircraft of the other may be operational. It also sets out a series of rules for establishing mutual trust. These include a commitment, when conducting operations, to communicate in a timely fashion about the manoeuvring intentions of military vessels and military aircraft. They also include a list of actions that should be avoided, including simulation of attacks by aiming guns, missiles, fire control radar, torpedo tubes or other weapons in the direction of military vessels and military aircraft encountered. The agreement specifies the radio frequencies to be used for communication and the signals vocabulary to be used if spoken language difficulties between commanding officers or masters are encountered. It also contains a provision for each party to the agreement to conduct an annual assessment meeting, led by senior military officers, of any events relating to the application of the agreement in the previous year.

At least two existing agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union (and then Russia), namely the Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas (1972), and the 1989 Agreement on Prevention of Dangerous Military Incidents, operate in a similar way in the bilateral relationship between those two states.

Given the increased scale of military activities in the Euro-Atlantic area today, and the increased number of close military encounters, just such an agreement is now needed between NATO and Russia to prevent accidental incidents or miscalculations leading to an escalation of tension and even confrontation. It would also be useful to engage Sweden and Finland, both of which are exposed to the dangers connected with increased military activities in the Baltic Sea region, into the discussions at an early stage.

The signatories of this Task Force statement are convinced that this objective should be pursued with utmost urgency. While it may seem a bureaucratic or technical measure, the future of Euro-Atlantic security might very well depend on it.

Signed

Adam Daniel Rotfeld, former Foreign Minister, (Poland) (Task Force Co-Chair);

Igor S. Ivanov, former Foreign Minister, President, Russian International Affairs Council, Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Russia) (Task Force Co-Chair);

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This paper is published in the name only of those Task Force members who have signed it, and not on behalf of the Task Force in its entirety.

Updates on project activities will be placed on the ELN, PISM, RIAC and USAK web-sites at the following addresses: www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org; www.pism.pl; www.russiancouncil.ru; www.usak.org.tr.

For further information and background on the project, contact one of the following:

Dr Ian Kearns
Director, ELN, London
iank@europeanleadershipnetwork.org | Tel: +44 (0)203 176 2552
www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org

Piotr Koscinski
Program Coordinator, PISM, Warsaw
koscinski@pism.pl | Tel: +48 (22) 556 80 00
www.pism.pl

Andrei Kortunov
Director-General, RIAC, Moscow
akortunov@neweurasia.ru | Tel: +7 (495) 225 6283
www.russiancouncil.ru

Ambassador Özdem Sanberk
Director, USAK, Ankara
merkez@usak.org.tr | Tel: +90 (0312) 212 28 86
www.usak.org.tr

Media Enquiries

For all media enquiries please contact

Shata Shetty, Deputy Director of the European Leadership Network

Tel: (+44) (0) 203 176 2554

Email: shatas@europeanleadershipnetwork.org

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PISM

