

The Dangers of NATO–Russian Confrontation: Why the Official Western Threat Analysis is Irrational

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We are witnessing a new era where NATO and Russia are engaged in deep a confrontation, including its military dimension. The West – especially the US and some countries on the Eastern borders of NATO – equal the Russian threat against Europe to that of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and Ebola. Plenty of studies examine Russian use of hybrid warfare in “aggressions” against independent states, including Ukraine, Georgia, and last but not least Estonia, a member of the Alliance.

The portrayal of Russia, as the leading military threat against NATO is a hopelessly flawed threat perception that makes no sense at strategic level, unless it serves unstated and concealed geopolitical goals of some great powers. Both a conventional and a nuclear war between NATO and Russia are completely irrational and in nobody’s interest, since it will inflict enormous damage and there could be no real winner.

If a conventional military incident might occur between NATO and Russia, the parties will most likely restrain themselves to avoid a major war, as they did in several confrontations briefly analysed in the article. If a nuclear confrontation occurs, the capabilities of both parties are far more than enough to change living conditions on Earth beyond recognition, when the remnants of humanity will struggle to survive.

It is in Europe’s interest to reverse the confrontational course with Russia, while the perception of an “aggressive” Russia as a key military threat mainly serves US interests. The ultimate paradox is that Russia would truly become a leading threat to peace and security if the West succeeds destabilising her.

Keywords: NATO, US, Russia, ISIS, conventional war, nuclear war

Introduction

US–Russian tensions have reached an unprecedented level since the end of the Cold War, when cooperation between the two countries broke off in Syria and the Obama administration started considering options to resolve the crisis, including direct US military strikes against the Assad regime without a UN Security Council resolution. [1] Lack of military cooperation and the possibility of parallel US–Russian bombing of each-others protégées in Syria could lead to a proxy war far more dangerous than simply providing various forms of aid (finances,

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weapons, training, intelligence info, etc.) to the respective parties (the Assad regime, the rebels, and/or terrorist groups, etc.), since it could lead to a direct military confrontation between the two great nuclear powers, that could possibly escalate into a major war.

The deterioration of diplomatic relations between the US and Russia lead to a reality, when the discussion of mortar fire by terrorist groups on the Russian Embassy in Syria was blocked by the US (plus Great Britain, and Ukraine) at the UN Security Council. [2] Such lack of trust and cooperation between great powers goes beyond rationality, contradicts international law and under no circumstances serves the interests of peace and prosperity of mankind.

Such conditions provide special actuality to reconsidering the threat assessment of Russia and the possibilities of new policies averting a major, direct military confrontation between the US and Russia – ultimately NATO and Russia.

Carefully Measured and Limited Russian Military Interventions In the Post-Cold War Era

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, combined with the demise of the Warsaw Pact signalled a new era when the legacy of the classic “Cold War” appeared to be mostly overcome for many politicians and experts around the world. NATO survived the unavoidable identity crisis resulting from the absence of a major communist threat against the West and waves of Eastern expansions become a success story, bringing NATO’s boundaries ever closer to Moscow. It has become a mantra that the Eastern expansion of the Alliance equals more security, stability and prosperity. NATO could even enter the post-Soviet space when the three Baltic States² became members of the Alliance and Russia could do nothing about it.

With the emergence of China [3] several Western politicians and analysts argued that Russia must align with the West to counter the growing influence of her Asian neighbour. An unnamed, high ranking Hungarian Ministry of Defence (MoD) official phrased it as follows: “*We must not invite Russia to NATO. Instead we should wait until Russia would beg for NATO membership on her knees.*” I have heard countless times that “*intensive Russian-Chinese political, economic, and military cooperation can only be temporary and unequal, where Russia could only play the role of a subordinated, junior partner.*” [4] “*Enhanced cooperation between Russia and China would prove to be a ‘death grip’ for Russia.*” – several defence policy experts of the Hungarian MoD argued.

It is by no means a coincidence that the re-emergence of Russia under Putin lead to increasing tensions with the West. Russian policies to halt Eastern expansion of NATO on the territory of the former Soviet Union successfully derailed ambitions of both Georgia and Ukraine, even though a geopolitical struggle concerning their NATO membership might not yet be over. Russia carefully managed both conflicts clearly avoiding a total war resulting in a “regime change” and prolonged Russian military occupation of entire states. Russia made it clear that she does not tolerate new NATO members in the post-Soviet space, advancing military occupation only as long as the boundaries of public support for Russia last. In Georgia, these boundaries are the so called “borders” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that Russia officially regards as independent states. Current boundaries of majority public support for Russia

2 Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

in Ukraine are Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk. Crimea is now part of Russia according to the Russian constitution, even though it is not recognised by international law. Parts of Donetsk and Lugansk are ruled by pro-Russian separatists, and still part of Ukraine on paper, but de facto act as client regimes of Moscow.

Russia also avoided a total war with the NATO member Estonia, limiting confrontation to cyber warfare and economic measures in 2007, that were more like a limited punishment for the replacement of the bronze soldier – a WWII monument surrounded by Russian pride and sensitivities – rather than an attempt to achieve a “regime change” in Estonia.

The Russian response to the Turkish downing of a Russian SU–24 bomber on 24 October, 2015, was also carefully measured avoiding direct military confrontation while assuring proper Russian deterrence capabilities are in place³ if Turkey attempts to change the course of the Russian military intervention in Syria by military action. [5] [6] [7] [8]

Why a Major War Between NATO and Russia is Irrational and Unlikely

We can debate whether the described Russian policies serve genuine Russian interests or not, but that is not the point in our analysis. Carefully measured Russian military actions within the post-Soviet space and against NATO member states suggest that the Russian leadership is well aware of the costs and risks of unnecessary escalation. If we accept that Russian military actions were and are carefully measured regarding the quoted conflicts, it highlights the irrationality and absurdity of any suggested Russian intentions to go to a major war against NATO.

Russia can physically not achieve a military balance against NATO, since she lacks the necessary GDP and population, as key foundations for an arms race against the West. To be more precise: Russia has a fragment of the GDP and population needed to support such an arms race. It is irrational to assume that the weaker party – in our case Putin’s Russia – would seriously consider entering a major war against an obviously stronger adversary. The fact that Russia has the second most powerful military in the world after the US, disregarding nuclear military capabilities, does not make any hypothetical Russian policies to conquer the West by military terms rational.

Even if Russia might be foolish enough to overstretch expanding her military capabilities in an attempt to match NATO, that – combined with low oil prices and Western sanctions – would definitely ruin the Russian economy, similarly to what happened to the former Soviet Union. If the Russian economy is ruined, it is needless to say, that the basis of sustaining an arms race is also ruined.

A major NATO–Russia war is irrational and unrealistic for simple reasons. As long as conventional weaponry is used, the parties could inflict enormous damage without winning the war. Once a conventional military victory is in sight – no matter who the winner might be – it is unlikely, that weaker nuclear power(s) would allow defeat, resorting to nuclear strikes. If a nuclear confrontation occurs, the capabilities of both parties are far more than enough to change living conditions on Earth beyond recognition, when the remnants of humanity will struggle to survive. [9] For such reasons a major war between NATO and Russia is in nobody’s interest and highly unlikely, no matter whether it is conventional or nuclear.

3 Powerful Air Defence capabilities, such as S–400; fighter escort of Russian bombers that did not appear necessary before, etc.

Even if Russia could do a “miracle”, entirely matching all capabilities of NATO, a major war between Russia and the Alliance would still not make sense. Or given the scale of the foreseeable destruction, it would rather be even more irrational.

Such considerations are not driven by pacifist idealism, but a desperate search of balance between probable destruction, risks and potential benefits of a major NATO–Russia war. Neither such considerations suggest that war in general is something irrational and unwinnable. There are several historic examples when great powers went to war against weaker states, when the great powers possessed overwhelming military superiority allowing them to control the outcome of the war. Such wars could make sense in geopolitical terms. There are also countless wars between weak states, tribes, etc. that might prove to make sense or not, but no matter how much damage is inflicted, the limited nature of such wars pose no significant threat to world peace and security.

In spite of all arguments suggesting that a major NATO–Russia military confrontation is completely absurd and irrational, we are witnessing a new era where the Alliance and Russia are engaged in a deep confrontation, including its military dimension. The portrayal of Russia, as a leading military threat against NATO is a hopelessly flawed threat perception that makes no sense at strategic level, unless it serves unstated and concealed policy goals of some great powers. Arguments that re-emerging Russia is “aggressive”, “revanchist” or “expansionist” [10] [11] cannot be taken seriously since Russia defends her geopolitical interests in countries traditionally belonging to her sphere of influence. It applies to not only the post-Soviet space but also to Syria, [12] where Russia has had good ties with the Assad family for some forty years.

An example of the mainly defensive nature of Russian actions at strategic level is Ukraine, where the denial of a long, common history with Russia cannot be a subject of a serious debate, even if Ukrainian nationalist might come to similar conclusions. Once the West attempts to take away Ukraine from Russia, the Russian insistence not to allow Ukraine to become a NATO and EU member state could only be a pretended surprise. We can argue whether Kiev has an independent foreign policy since the violent takeover of power in 2014, or not. We can safely assume that Ukraine is caught in a conflict between the West and Russia, where the war, the economic and social results of such a confrontation clearly do not serve genuine Ukrainian interests.

Given the geopolitical location of Ukraine, which is not a great power, surrounded by two “tectonic plates”, namely the West (NATO and EU) and the East (in this case Russia, a great power), genuine Ukrainian interest would be served if the country had balanced, good relationship with both “tectonic plates”. She might prefer one “tectonic plate” to the other to a certain degree, however a good, balanced relationship is definitely a genuine Ukrainian national interest. It is obviously *not* a genuine Ukrainian national interest to break relations with either “tectonic plates”, or form an alliance with one of them against the other and try to win a war against a “tectonic plate” mainly on her own. This is precisely what happened, when Ukraine asked for NATO and EU membership, and was caught in a war with Russia in Eastern Ukraine, when neither NATO, nor EU membership was achieved. Ukraine mainly fights Russia on her own – despite Western political support, economic sanctions against Russia and loans from the IMF. The country can clearly not rely on substantial, direct military involvement of Western powers in the war in Eastern Ukraine that could match Russian capabilities as superior or at least equal.

Even if Ukraine had a flourishing economy rather than living standards matching severely underdeveloped African countries, with economic outlooks even worse than in Africa, breaking most political, cultural and economic ties with Russia in a historically short time is rather suicidal than rational, when economic interests are sacrificed for presumed political gains.

From a Russian point of view, the country *defends* the “buffer state” Ukraine that is clearly considered to be her sphere of influence *at strategic level*, even though some military action – such as the annexation of Crimea, or support to separatists in Donetsk and Lugansk – could be labelled as “*offensive*” operations.

Russia clearly has both the political will and the power not to allow Ukraine to become a member of NATO and the EU in the foreseeable future. This is why Western sanctions against Russia are counterproductive and fail so far to bring the desired results, hurting both genuine European and Russian interests.

It is in Europe’s interest to reverse the confrontational course with Russia, while the perception of an “aggressive” and “expansionist” Russia as a key military threat mainly serves officially unstated and unadmitted US interests. Namely: justification of greater military spending, reinstallation of a lost European reliance on the US in all terms against an exaggerated threat stemming from Russia. Unstated US policy goals also include weakening of any rivals, such as Russia or even Europe that is an integral part of the Western world.

It is unfortunate, that junior partners of the US in Europe have not yet found the way to resist US lead geopolitical conflicts that hurt genuine European interests. Such US driven geopolitical conflicts are not limited to counter Russia, but also apply to several countries in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

The Iraq war to topple the Saddam regime is a failed attempt to “export democracy”, since it led to civil war, chaos, death, destruction, and ultimately the rise of ISIS, the most powerful and dangerous terrorist organisation in modern history that executes all opponents, including Christians. [13] The Syria war to topple Assad with US backed opposition resulted in a long lasting civil war, enormous destruction, Russian military intervention, and a migration wave to Europe, which is also a major security threat, hurting genuine European interests. The failed Western military intervention in Afghanistan also provided a great contribution to the amount of migrants/refugees travelling to Europe. Elimination of the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya created favourable conditions for instability and insecurity, [14] civil war, and cheaply refineable, and thus good quality Libyan oil exports to Europe are disrupted, ISIS has gained ground, [15] and uncontrolled, illegal migration flourishes through Libya. It is safe to conclude, that all these developments contradict genuine European interests, not to mention the countries that are subject to destruction.

The Ultimate Paradox: When Russia Truly Becomes a Leading Threat

Paradoxically Russia would indeed become truly dangerous for the peace, stability and prosperity of Western world if the West succeeds breaking Russia in political and economic terms, successfully installing a new “coloured revolution” in Moscow in order to topple Putin’s power. Successful destabilisation of Russia could lead to many unintended or even unwanted consequences, such as major accidents in Russian nuclear power plants for whatever reasons, or Russian nuclear weapons falling into terrorist hands, major disruptions of

Russian energy exports to Europe, previously unseen Russian migration waves to the West, the rise of religious extremism and terrorism in Russia that is also international in nature, etc. Such possible consequences suggest that a stable, re-emerged Russia under the leadership of Putin is the lesser “evil” against peace and security of not only the West, but the whole world.

It highlights the irresponsible nature of Western policies when attempting to break or subordinate Russia. Such attempts prove that the Western world fails to understand what Putin means when referring to the continuity of independent Russian foreign policy throughout the whole of Russian history. Similarly to US policies to save major private banks with taxpayers’ money in 2008, that are “too big to fail”: [16] [17] [18] Russia is also “too big to fail” when it comes to genuine security interests of mankind.

Why and How Should the West and Russia Cooperate?

Russian and Western cultures have a lot in common, even though the Russian culture also has significant Eastern attributes. Geographically a great part of Russia is also part of Europe, since it is on the Western side of the Ural Mountains. Historically Russia did not only confront Western powers, but also formed powerful alliances with the West. For these reasons Russia could be viewed as a natural ally of the West, supporting the arguments of US president-elect Donald Trump who intends to improve relations with Russia, breaking with the policies of the Obama administration according to which Russia became the No. 1 security threat to the Western world.

There are plenty of common challenges, where Western and Russian cooperation could serve mutual interests. I view the fight against international terrorism [19] and countering illegal, mass migration to Europe as good examples of possible cooperation. In case of fighting international terrorism, intelligence data could be shared and actions against terrorists could be coordinated. When countering illegal, mass migration to Europe the root causes (wars, political repression, poverty, religious conflicts, ecological degradation, etc.) in the countries of origin should be tackled, those that “beg” for Western-Russian cooperation.

Policy Recommendations to Western Decision-Makers

There are a few key issues in Western policy terms that need to be reconsidered. As long we want good relations and meaningful cooperation with Russia, we need to respect Russian interests in the post-Soviet region, that more or less match the territory of the former Soviet Union. NATO expansion into Russian zones of interest should be voluntarily terminated by the Alliance and the aspirants as well, since Russia does not tolerate that and it generates unnecessary conflicts resulting in less security. Examples of Georgia and Ukraine support this argument when – assuming current policies – no mutually acceptable solutions for NATO and Russia are in sight.

It is clear, that officially assuring Russia that no Eastern expansion of NATO would occur in the foreseeable future would be a major defence policy change. However, it appears to be the price of good relations between the Alliance and Russia. Such a policy change would acknowledge an already visible fact. According to current, official NATO policies, enlargement is limited to the decision of the Alliance and the aspirant country, when no third party has a

say. In reality, Russia – as a third party – does indeed have a say, since she has the political will and the power to halt Eastern NATO expansion, as we could see it in the case of Georgia and Ukraine, no matter whether we like it, or not.

The Western world should also terminate any policies that are – not admittedly – aimed to break or subordinate Russia. Putin’s Russia proved to be resistant to such attempts when damage in economic and other terms hit both Europe and Russia, resulting in a lose-lose game. The later the Western world acknowledges this, the more damage would occur with no policy change in sight on Moscow’s side.

The Western world should at least tacitly accept that Crimea is no longer part of Ukraine, but Russian. Self-determination is an integral part of international law and Russia had no need to force the Crimean population to vote to become part of Russia “at gunpoint”. This was and is the genuine interest of the overwhelmingly Russian population of Crimea, and also Russia of course. Those who know the Russian mentality well enough might agree that it was clear from the very beginning that once Russia takes Crimea, she would not give this land back to Ukraine unless there is a dramatic liberal political earthquake in Russia, a new “coloured revolution” that is clearly not in sight. We might not like the current Russian political system or her role in the post-Soviet region but such realities need to be taken seriously.

Policy Recommendations to Russian Decision-Makers

Russia should terminate policies according to which NATO is viewed as a key threat to security. Since a major war between NATO and Russia is highly unlikely and Russia successfully withstands Eastern expansion attempts of Alliance, such issues should be solved exclusively peacefully, with mutual respect.

Russia should come up with powerful offers to countries that become victims of failed NATO accession attempts. Such offers might include security guarantees, improved economic cooperation in exchange of guarantees that former NATO aspirants will no longer want to join the Alliance and the interests of the Russian minorities would be respected.

To be realistic: the NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine is not in sight. Even if it could be accomplished in the future, the territorial conflicts with Russia generate a risk of a NATO–Russian war that is in nobody’s interest. In other words: it would serve the genuine interests of both Russia, NATO and the former aspirant countries, if the relations with Russia are normalised and geopolitical realities are officially acknowledged.

Russia should cease all provocative acts, such as airspace violations, flying close to ships or aircrafts belonging to NATO, cyber-attacks, increased military presence at the borders of the Alliance, etc.

Russia should provide security guarantees to NATO that she would not resort to hybrid warfare against the Baltic states in order to promote the real or the presumed interests of local Russian ethnic minorities in exchange to the respect of genuine, legitimate interests of such ethnic minorities. Such Russian guarantees could only work on a mutually beneficial basis.

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