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Ukraine and its Neighbourhood
How to Deal with Aggressive Russia

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On Monday 9 February 2015, the NATO Defense College (NDC) Research Division hosted a Roundtable entitled "Ukraine and its Neighbourhood – How to Deal with Aggressive Russia." The event brought together 27 experts from various research institutions in Belarus, Georgia, Germany, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the United States and Uzbekistan, along with senior practitioners from the International Staff (IS) and International Military Staff (IMS) at NATO Headquarters. The Roundtable discussed Ukraine's defence cooperation with NATO, Russia's military capabilities in the context of the current crisis besetting Ukraine, and the perspectives of neighbouring countries.

The following report summarizes the core issues and findings of the discussion, obviously without covering every part of the intense and sometimes outspoken debate in its entirety. The conclusions are those of the authors, not necessarily reflecting consensus among Roundtable participants.

Last year was a decisive one for Russia. It hosted the Winter Olympics, only to annex Crimea almost immediately afterwards and intervene directly in Eastern Ukraine. The friendly Olympic bear rapidly became a wild grizzly.

Despite sanctions and the fall in oil prices, Russia is continuing to aggravate the conflict in Ukraine that started with the Russian invasion of Crimea. Why, and how? Some answers are provided below. The challenges faced by Ukraine and the West in calibrating an appropriate response are also explored. So, too, are the perspectives of several of Russia's other neighbours.

Ukraine as a mirror to Russia, or even as a Siamese twin?

Most obviously, Ukraine is quite close to Russia in political, cultural, and ideological terms. Everything that happens in Ukraine, therefore, is readily projected onto Russia. That is why the Kremlin views a pro-Western, democratic Ukraine as a potential threat to itself.

But other, deep-lying issues also have to be taken into account. Within Russia, there has always been the sense that Russia and Ukraine were not two separate nations but one, divided through the "mistake" of Ukrainian independence. The political origins of the Russian state lie with the so-called "*sobiraniye zemel*" ("gathering of lands"), a process based on the conquest of neighbouring territories, with the enlarged state held together by a strong central authority. This strategy successfully transformed the weak Principality of Muscovy into the Russian Empire, which then found its place in the Concert of Europe. Russia's greatness grew further during the Soviet period.

That said, the creation of the original Russian Empire was closely preceded by the absorption of Ukraine as an inalienable part of Russia's "Malorossiya" ("little Russia"). The treaties of 1654-1668 made Ukraine an integral part of Muscovy and laid the foundation for the strong Russian Empire of the 1700s.

The concept of the so-called "*Russkiy mir*" ("Russian world") is rooted in the idea that a "single nation" exists across Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Ukraine's drift toward the West thus not only threatens the core of Moscow's imperial aspirations, but also means that what was originally part of this single Russian nation is moving into the orbit of rival powers.

Geopolitical connotations

Russian strategic culture is based on two qualities: a deep feeling of insecurity, and a major emphasis on power projection. Ukraine plays significant roles in both of these.[2]

Though Russia covers an enormous territory, its European flank lacks strategic depth. Russia has regularly been attacked or invaded by different enemies (Tatars, Poles, French and Germans), often from the West. Russia thus seeks buffer zones, not only through military deployment but also by ensuring that neighbouring states remain firmly under its influence. One of the greatest dangers defined by Moscow today is the (ungrounded) concern about the potential deployment of NATO troops (and ballistic missile defence) in Ukraine, which would further reduce Russian strategic depth.

Thus, the Kremlin portrays events in Ukraine not as a national movement within a sovereign state, but as a battle between East and West: the United States vs. Russia, with Russia defending "traditional human values" against the UN-based international system. Seen in this perspective, the events in Ukraine also fit perfectly into Moscow's self-branding as the "Third Rome," which must protect the world from the metaphysical Antichrist, today represented by the West with its "decline in morality" and its refusal to respect traditional spheres of influence. So, from Moscow's standpoint, the "liberal West" is fighting alongside "neo-Nazi" Ukrainians, who are really little more than American stooges. Russian presidential advisor Sergey Glazyev has stated that the United States will threaten Russia openly in just a few years, and that Russia should be prepared militarily, socially, economically and technologically, in a conservative-based coalition, to stop this aggression.[3]

The limitations of Russian military capabilities

Today, due to its recent territorial aggression, Russia matters more than it did twelve months ago. In Ukraine, it has shown that it is able to pursue a political objective through a comprehensive non-military and military toolbox. Putin's continuous military reform efforts, together with Russia's lessons learned from the wars in Chechnya and Georgia, enabled the rapid deployment of tens of thousands of troops from all over Russia to the Ukrainian border. Even though neither the concept of expeditionary operations nor the Western perspective on transformation was ostensibly used by Russia, it actually developed a concept of strategic mobility within the country by learning from Western-style operations without relying on the Soviet principle of mass-mobilization. Nevertheless, in the course of the Ukraine-Russian conflict, the clear limits of Russia's military capabilities have become evident. They have manifested themselves in different ways: not only in terms of sustainability, but also with regard to standardization and interoperability, which have been severely limited by overreliance on imported foreign technology from various countries for different units. The interoperability problems are not limited to technology. They also involve a human dimension: Russia's increased reliance on so-called "military provider companies," composed mainly of locals from Central Asia, highlights the question of their interoperability with regular (mostly ethnic Russian) forces.[4]

However, Russia's strategy in Ukraine has never been reliant on military means alone. Lessons identified from its previous acts of aggression in border regions have been learned, especially as regards the need to synchronize the political aim with non-military as well as military means and tactics. Despite its awareness that its improved conventional capabilities still did not match NATO's, the Kremlin was able to ensure that its strategy as applied in Crimea (and in Eastern Ukraine) would not necessarily rely on military superiority. Russia's confidence that it could annex Crimea was based on political rather than military considerations. Its use of the element of surprise, its initial denial of even having Russian troops in Ukraine, its aggression with no declaration of war, and its exploitation of specific ethnic, social and geographic circumstances in the region enabled Russia to successfully implement an advanced form of asymmetric warfare.

Consequently, NATO as a politico-military Alliance should look at its political (and not just military) resources to counter Russia's aggression and its applied strategy and tactics.[5] Possible options would include a mix of diplomatic, information-related and military resources. The Readiness Action Plan approved at the Wales Summit in September is NATO's answer to the military challenges. By a twofold strategy (i.e., increased military presence and activities, providing assurance above all to its Eastern European members; and adaptation of its long-term military posture and capabilities), NATO has tried to avoid further escalation while, at the same time, demonstrating a swift and firm response to the changed security environment on its eastern flank. The same must be done in terms of information and diplomacy within the Alliance, even if NATO cannot be seen as the leading actor in dealing with non-military aspects of hybrid warfare.

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2   See Isabel Facon, "The Russian Way of War: In Crisis?" *The Oxford Handbook of War*, Ed. Julian Lindley-French and Yves Boyer, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 275.

3   See Sergey Glazyev, "Ugroza voyn I otvet Rosii," 3 September 2014 http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Ugroza-voin-i-otvet-Rossii-16920

4   The Russian Duma approved new regulations on military service in January 2015, making it possible for non-Russian citizens to serve in the Russian Armed Forces. See http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/47451

Concerning the role of PMC in Russia see Igor Sutyagin, Russia's PMC, NDC Research Report, upcoming

5   German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized during discussions at the Munich Security Conference 2015 the necessity to deal with non-military aspects of Russia's hybrid warfare.

Partnership tools in times of war, or renovating a burning house

Today, NATO and Ukraine can look back at nearly a quarter of a century of partnership. Besides its relative continuity over a long period, it has been the special quality of this relationship which has made it different from others. The 1997 "Charter on a Distinctive Partnership" clearly recognizes the importance of an independent, stable and democratic Ukraine for European stability. Besides Ukraine's changing political ambitions regarding NATO membership in the 2000s, the NATO-Ukraine Commission has always been a preferred forum for political consultation and cooperation between Kyiv and the transatlantic Allies.

The fruitful political dialogue and Ukraine's unique operational contributions to all NATO-led operations – and the NATO Response Force – were never mirrored in the results of NATO-Ukraine cooperation on the country's defence reform. Recommended reforms were often not fully implemented. Whether NATO's latest pronouncements on strengthened support for Ukraine will deliver better results is an open question, but the signs are not encouraging. The numerous changes in government during the last twelve months have not led to a consistent approach towards implementing the required reforms. The Ukrainian military's preoccupation with warfighting rather than defence reform has been another factor. In addition, even if Ukraine could demonstrate sufficient focus, there is the larger issue of different levels of ambition regarding the purpose of partnership and reform, which over time could dampen Kyiv's commitment. For example, Ukraine's expectations and especially calls for direct Allied military support should be contrasted with NATO's clear communication of the principles delimiting the relationship: (1) Ukraine is a partner, not an Ally; (2) NATO is not a first responder in the Ukraine crisis; (3) NATO as an Alliance cannot supply weapons to Ukraine (only nations can).

Ultimately, the long-term success of future NATO-Ukraine defence cooperation will depend on the willingness of both sides to draw lessons from recent years. Each should reflect honestly on how realistic their mutually agreed objectives and milestones are, and why the mismatch between rhetoric and actual reform has occurred.

Nobody feels exactly the same, but everybody could be "next"

When assessing the perspectives of the various countries in Russia's neighbourhood on the crisis in Ukraine, it becomes clear that there is little homogeneity among their respective policies. Positions are linked to their particular relations not only with Russia, but also with the West (i.e., their individual relations with NATO and the EU).

The NATO Bucharest Summit and its decision that "Georgia and Ukraine will become members of the Alliance" can arguably be seen as the starting point for Russia openly opposing Western values by military means. In this respect, the Georgian war in summer 2008 was arguably Russia's response to the Alliance's open door policy. Even though the five-day war marked the beginning of Russian aggression in the eyes of many observers, there are more differences than similarities between the conflict at that time and the current crisis. In Georgia, the EU was willing and able to negotiate a ceasefire in an officially declared war, which is not the case in Ukraine. Regarding its continued political ambition of NATO membership, Georgia is unique among Russia's neighbours. Therefore, keeping the frozen conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia alive by means of "minor incidents" is in the Russian interest. The recently signed bilateral security agreements between Russia and Abkhazia, as well as South Ossetia, are possible indicators of that. Georgia faces a dilemma: especially in the long term, there is no alternative to improving its relations with Russia. However, enhanced cooperation between Georgia and Russia in selected and perceived "soft" areas, like agriculture, could increase Georgian dependency on Russia – and ultimately the risk of being used as a political instrument (of Russian soft power).

As one response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, NATO decided in spring 2014 to further strengthen its relations with its eastern partners. Moldova, as one of them, not only accepted NATO's offer, but also responded in other policy fields like energy security, diversifying its supplies in 2014 in order to be less dependent on electricity from Transnistria – another frozen conflict fuelled by Russia. The advantage of having no common border with Russia is probably well understood in Chisinau. Even though Moldova is by constitution a neutral state, which cooperates with NATO, it was only in March 2014 that it first contributed troops to a NATO-led operation.

Since the first Minsk agreement, Belarus, Russia's closest ally, which is geographically close to NATO and the EU but does not seek any kind of Western integration, has obtained greater political visibility. One could argue that Belarus and its authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenko are the only beneficiaries of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. The "last dictator in Europe" took the stage effectively as a broker in the conflict. Even if he offered "only" the venue (ensuring that chairs and snacks were available, as noted ironically in a widely circulated Tweet),[6] at the Minsk talks Lukashenko welcomed European leaders such as Angela Merkel and François Hollande.[7] Looking at Belarusian-Russian relations, it is not evident at first glance who is depending on whom. While Lukashenko has learnt over the years to deal with Putin and sell his loyalty to Russia for gas, oil and other subsidies, he has at the same time maintained Belarusian sovereignty and

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6   The tweet shows Lukashenko in an interview, played in a continuous loop, stating that his contribution was to keep people happy and to make sure that there are enough chairs, snacks, and drinks. See http://coub.com/view/4zmnv
7   Observers have ironically reminded that Merkel and Hollande are the first heads of state of Germany and France to visit Minsk since Hitler and Napoleon.

limited Russian interference. Lukashenko's aim is to retain this modus vivendi and continue his balancing act between Europe and Russia in order to stay in power. Regarding the solution of the crisis in the Ukraine, too, Belarus has its own perspective. From a Belarusian point of view, (1) Russia should withdraw from the Ukraine – but not from Crimea, as "Ukraine never really defended it in the military sense of the term"; (2) Ukraine should announce its neutrality; and (3) a peacekeeping contingent with a possible Belarusian contribution should be deployed to Eastern Ukraine.

Another critical region in Russia's neighbourhood is Central Asia, which might be perceived from the outside as homogenous in terms of attitudes towards Russia, but actually represents a variety of different opinions in this respect. Even though the region is geographically further from Europe and NATO than the other three countries briefly discussed above, all five Central Asian states are members of the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, four of them since the early 1990s. In positioning themselves towards Russia, they, too, find themselves in a dilemma, as they are not only part of the Euro-Atlantic structure, but also of the Euro-Asia structure (as members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization - CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organization). Whereas Kazakhstan was in the first place supportive of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Putin's statement on non-existent Kazakh statehood in summer 2014 caused anger and irritation.[8] Uzbekistan showed surprising independence in emphasizing the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty; the Uzbek position included a proposal to establish direct channels of communication between Kyiv and Moscow in order to solve the conflict. In the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, their complete economic dependence on Russia is mirrored in their reluctant reaction: they cannot afford to spoil their relationship with the Kremlin.

Even if Russia's aggressive behaviour must have been a shock for its Central Asian neighbourhood, the crisis in Ukraine is unlikely to be a turning point in the relationship between the Central Asian countries and Russia. Economic interdependence and Afghanistan's unclear future make Moscow an indispensable partner, even if mutual trust might be limited. As a result, the role of China in the region might become even stronger.[9]

Looking at the different positions of Russia's neighbours, it becomes clear that every one of them has its own political objectives to achieve through its positioning in the Ukraine crisis. All of them have in common that they are members of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, even though their ambitions in this programme, as well as towards Western integration, vary significantly. Notwithstanding this, NATO should carefully consider their point of view in this discussion, as well as the dilemmas they face, because these dilemmas are not so different from those they were confronted with 25 years ago. The PfP was set up in 1994, between NATO and the countries involved, according to "an expression of joint conviction that stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic area can be achieved only through cooperation and common action" – albeit with the acceptance of varying degrees of interaction. The same holds just as true in 2015.

Conclusion

For quite some time, NATO experts have been talking about the defining moment when the Alliance would redeploy from Afghanistan and switch from "deployed NATO to prepared NATO." Hardly anybody expected Russia to cause a real defining moment not just for the Alliance, but mainly for itself. With its aggressive behaviour it has sent a warning to all its allies and partners. For NATO and the West Russia is no longer just a difficult partner, which is nevertheless interested in common security and stability. It seems to be becoming an increasingly isolated and unpredictable state, whose authoritarian regime is fighting for its own survival.

8   See Robert Coalson, "Is Putin 'Rebuilding Russia' According To Solzhenitsyn's Design?," 1 September 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-putin-solzhenitsyn-1990-essay/26561244.html
9   See Bayram Balci and Daniyar Kosnazarov, "The Ukraine Crisis's Central Asian Echoes," *Eurasia Outlook*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 25 December 2014, http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=57603