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the challenges of the 21st century*

Brinkmanship, Deterrence and De-escalation between NATO and Russia:

*Report from a roundtable discussion held in London
on 27 May 2015*

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Executive summary

The European Leadership Network (ELN), in cooperation with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and NATO Public Diplomacy Division, organized a high level round-table discussion, bringing together a group of **32 policy-makers, advisors, parliamentarians, former military leaders and serving MFA/MoD/NATO officials** from the UK, U.S., Canada, Italy, France, Germany, Turkey, Romania, Poland, Croatia, the Netherlands, Norway, Hungary, Lithuania, and Georgia.

This report is an overview of the discussions held in London. Comments are not attributed to individual speakers. The recommendations made in this report are based on points made in the discussion but reflect neither the consensus view of participants nor the official positions of the UK FCO or NATO. Key points made include the following:

In its policy towards Russia, **NATO should combine a two track approach: deterrence and de-escalation**. Maintenance of **political unity and cohesion of NATO is the crucial asset** underwriting the effectiveness of all our deterrence, assurance and de-escalation efforts.

On deterrence:

- NATO should continue with implementation of the **Readiness Action Plan**. It should also establish the parameters for longer-term development of the capabilities and command structures needed for Article 5 missions and endorse them in the **"Warsaw Strategic Adaptation Initiative"** in July 2016.
- A compromise within the Alliance should be reached on establishing a **permanent presence of NATO air and ground forces** along the Eastern flank, below the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act's "no substantial combat forces" pledge.
- Opportunity must be seized to **deepen the relationship between NATO and the European Union** to strengthen our resilience against hybrid challenges.
- Regarding **Georgian and Ukrainian membership** in the Alliance, NATO countries should focus on preparing assistance packages for both countries instead of creating any false hopes for a breakthrough at the Warsaw Summit.

On de-escalation:

- NATO must make sure that the **military lines of communication** with Russia are kept open and, if possible, expanded.
- NATO should explore initiating a **multilateral arrangement on avoiding military incidents** involving all NATO members, Russia and possibly NATO partners Sweden and Finland.
- NATO should be **ready to discuss selected topics with Russia**, provided it is done with clearly identified aims and with all Allies on board. Topics for conversation can include military transparency and reciprocal confidence-building measures, counter-terrorism, arms control and disarmament, as well as Syria and the Arctic.
- NATO and its members should encourage and support **contacts with the Russian strategic community, academia and civil society**. There is a need to communicate NATO's policy more clearly to the Russians.

Report from the roundtable discussion and recommendations

Even before March 2014, NATO-Russia relations had reached a stalemate, with the formal 'partnership' between the two understood differently by both sides. Over the last year, NATO-Russia relations have descended into the gravest security crisis since the end of the Cold War. The relationship is now full of mistrust. Beyond its aggression against Ukraine, Russia has been engaged in a game of dangerous military brinkmanship with the Alliance and its partners as charted by the European Leadership Network. Its recent nuclear sabre-rattling has been even more worrisome.

Both NATO and Russia have signalled intent to further increase military presence and the number of exercises taking place in the common border area in the second part of 2015 and beyond. While some argue that the caution of the leaders and professionalism of the militaries on all sides will not allow the situation to deteriorate, history is full of examples of leaders who thought they could control events only to find that events developed a momentum of their own. A growing number of commentators see a potential for further military escalation, intended or unintended.

NATO's overall approach to Russia was formulated at the 2014 Newport Summit where the Alliance leaders stated the following: "*The nature of the Alliance's relations with Russia and our aspiration for partnership will be contingent on our seeing a clear, constructive change in Russia's actions which demonstrates compliance with international law and its international obligations and responsibilities.*" The probability that Russia will enact such a change, opening the way for NATO to re-new its partnership with Moscow, is slim. However, this does not preclude the Alliance from initiating dialogue with Russia on specific issues, especially on de-escalation of tensions.

Against this background, the participants of the London roundtable were invited to discuss possible ways to combine two tracks of NATO policy:

1) Deterrence: efforts to strengthen resistance to, and deterrence of, further destabilising Russian behaviour in Europe and to reassure the NATO Allies closest to Russia;

2) De-escalation: possible measures to manage the risks of brinkmanship and further military escalation and to conduct dialogue with Russia on matters of common interest.

The report is organised into four sections. The first considers what more NATO can and should do in relation to further implementing its deterrence policy and in the re-assurance

of those allies positioned closest to Russia. The second considers what kind of threat NATO faces from Russia and what options are available to manage the current confrontation more effectively to ensure it does not escalate unnecessarily and/or unintentionally. The third section considers the merits of dialogue and engagement with Russia on matters of mutual interest and the possible substance of such dialogue. The last part draws some conclusions from all the proceedings in the form of recommendations for NATO and its Member States.

While the narrative part of the report is based on the contributions of the participants during the discussion, **the recommendations have been prepared by ELN research staff and do not represent a consensus opinion of all participants. They also do not reflect the position of either the FCO or NATO.**

1. Implementation of NATO Deterrence and Assurance Policy

The Readiness Action Plan (RAP) agreed in Wales has been the most visible element of a recent wider reorientation of the Alliance towards deterring threats to its territory and population. It consists of a set of assurance measures (increased military presence, exercises and activities along the eastern flank) and adaptation measures (changes to the Alliance's long-term military posture, command structure and capabilities, such as beefing-up the NATO Response Force and creation of the 'spearhead' Very High Readiness Joint Task Force). While most of the public attention has been devoted to the land component, there have also been developments in the air and maritime domains. The RAP's political and military relevance, with regards to Russia, can be summarized as the attempt to show that NATO's territory is off limits to Russian military provocations or operations of any kind, hybrid or otherwise.

All participants agreed that **implementation of the Wales summit decisions** on deterrence and adaptation of the Alliance is proceeding at a reasonable pace and is providing a higher level of assurance to the most exposed Allies. One major outstanding issue highlighted by a number of participants is the **speed of NATO's possible reaction to any negative developments**: there is still work to do on streamlining the decision-making procedures at the political level and overcoming the bottlenecks identified at the military level (for example: legal and logistical challenges of cross-border movement of troops and equipment within NATO territory).

It was also pointed out that the nature of NATO's activities in the framework of the RAP should have **a reassurance effect for Russia**, since it clearly points to the limited and defensive intent of the Alliance. Other participants had a more pessimistic view on this, noting that Russia decided to treat NATO as an opponent long before the outbreak of the present crisis and therefore would interpret all of NATO's actions through this prism.

A number of participants noted **the need to go beyond the full implementation of the Readiness Action Plan**. Several speakers supported establishing a permanent presence of NATO ground forces along the Eastern flank (but staying below the 1997 Founding Act no substantial forces pledge), the pre-positioning of equipment in the area, and further adaptation of contingency planning, command structure and intelligence sharing arrangements. The recent proposal from the Baltic States to permanently place a brigade-size unit in the area was mentioned. A participant suggested that it could be conceived of as a multinational force consisting of half U.S. troops and half personnel from other NATO states. According to the proponents of permanent presence, it would demonstrate NATO's steadfastness in defending the territorial integrity of all the members. It would not lead to further escalation, but rather influence Russia's strategic calculus in a positive way, by discouraging adventurism.

Some participants argued on the other hand that decisions on the adaptation of NATO's military posture, especially placing significant forces along the Eastern flank, should be evaluated against the need to maintain NATO unity in its broadest sense. The concerns of some Allies regarding the possible escalatory consequences of such deployments should not be brushed aside. Others further underlined the need for NATO also to be able to respond to the challenges coming from the Middle East and North Africa, the Western Balkans, and the Arctic region, to ensure that the security perceptions of all allies are being addressed.

The participants noted the increased frequency and visibility of **NATO and NATO-related military exercises**. The Alliance has deliberately chosen not to mirror Russian large scale snap exercises, but rather mainly expand its existing training schedule, with a special emphasis on the Eastern flank. It was noted that of the roughly 300 NATO and NATO-related exercises planned for 2015, over 100 are taking place in the East. Reacting to the proposals to introduce annual or biannual large-scale high visibility exercises, some participants argued that military exercises should keep a focus on quality and not size. National or 'coalition-of-the-willing' exercises must also have a strong NATO dimension through involvement of NATO command structures and through sharing lessons learned within NATO so as to maximize their value. The exercises should push the decision-makers, their support structures and the militaries to the limit, which requires using realistic and challenging scenarios.

A key theme of the discussion was that the effectiveness of deterrence and assurance efforts relies primarily on the **political unity and cohesion of the Alliance**. A number of participants warned that Russia would assess NATO's cohesion and credibility of deterrence through the prism of defence spending, and that it already considers NATO's European Allies as weak and militarily ineffective. Implementing the Wales defence funding pledge should therefore be seen as part of NATO's policy toward Russia.

The participants underlined the need to broaden deterrence and assurance measures by **coordinating NATO actions with the activities of national governments**, and activities

within the EU and other organizations (such as Council of Europe or the OSCE). Some participants noted that the threat of additional sanctions, as well as the prospect of changing the sanctions regime, can be as effective a deterrent against Russian assertiveness as NATO's actions.

Several participants argued that the crisis in relations with Russia provides **a unique opportunity to deepen the relationship between NATO and the European Union** in order to strengthen our resilience. A wider exchange of information and intelligence assessments, as well as coordination of planning should be pursued as a priority matter. Some participants suggested a more ambitious agenda, for example reaching an understanding on an EU-NATO 'playbook' to address hybrid threats, leading to an effective division of labour.

2. NATO – Russia crisis management in the era of hybrid warfare

As long as the relationship with Russia remains confrontational, the confrontation will need to be managed. In addition to measures on deterrence and re-assurance, and in order to limit the chances of a full-blown crisis breaking out, it will be necessary to find ways of balancing resolve with restraint – all in the context of a “hybrid warfare” strategy deployed by Russia.

Russian hybrid warfare strategy is designed to exploit the weaknesses of specific opponents. In Ukraine these have been primarily the fragility of state structures and internal divisions. With regards to Western liberal democracies and NATO, Russia would want to use prolonged decision-making processes and divisions of opinion within and between countries. Russia merges operations across different dimensions to defeat the opponent or disrupt, in the most effective way, its willingness to fight. In the NATO-Russia context, that would most likely mean that Russia would try to stay below the level which would trigger a military response under Article 5, although it may use armed forces or armed proxies for intimidation, coercion, or as a cover for operations in other dimensions. It was also highlighted by some participants that Russia blends the conventional and nuclear dimensions in exercising its policy, posing a dilemma for the Alliance: to what extent is Russia's nuclear posturing a case of defensive rhetoric, and to what extent does it signal a readiness to use nuclear weapons offensively during a crisis?

A number of participants warned against projecting Cold War thinking about the Soviet Union's goals and strategy to the present era of relations with Russia. The participants agreed that, once the main elements of the Russian strategy are identified, **the Alliance and its members can generate efficient solutions to reduce hybrid warfare's effectiveness** and discourage Russia from employing some of its most brazen elements against NATO. The response should go beyond the military dimension, as Russia also seeks to exploit vulnerabilities in the societal or economic areas.

Some participants noted the actions already taken or planned at **the national level** in the most exposed NATO states, including increases of defence budgets and the level of readiness of armed forces, reviewing the legal framework to allow better coordination between the civilian side and the military, and more frequent and realistic exercises testing the response to hybrid methods, such as use of proxies or provocations. At **the NATO level**, comprehensive response to the challenge should urgently lead to a better use of intelligence and other means to swiftly identify and attribute threatening developments. Countering Russian propaganda and dis-information efforts directed at NATO populations should also be treated as a matter of urgency.

Some participants argued that while the Western countries should not engage in hybrid warfare against Russia, **there are some areas where they can push back** and use their own 'soft power' against Russia. Support for Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova should be seen as an element of resisting Russia's pressure. Russian intelligence activities, information operations and other methods used to influence public opinion in Western states should be exposed, as well as evidence of corruption and accumulation of wealth of the current Russian elite.

It was noted that, in the context of hybrid warfare, there are **no well-established patterns of interaction when dealing with 'grey area' situations** which could evolve into a full-fledged military confrontation. The majority of participants agreed that, regardless of assigning blame for the outbreak of the current crisis, **NATO should work on military-to-military communication with Russia and on procedures to deal with such incidents**. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg recently announced that 'hotline' communication procedures between NATO and Russia are ready on a 24/7 basis, which includes direct contact line between Supreme Allied Commander Europe and the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee and the Russian Head of General Staff. The Norwegian Ministry of Defence also has its own 'hotline' to Russian Northern Fleet Headquarters.

It was suggested that **NATO could explore additional steps, for example based on an agreement to avoid dangerous military incidents signed between the United States and China** in late 2014. This agreement sets out the principles and procedures of communication that should be observed during encounters between military vessels and aircraft. It contains a provision for an annual assessment meeting, led by senior military officers, to review 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. A possible multilateral arrangement involving all NATO members, partners of NATO in the Euro-Atlantic area, and Russia, should now be explored.

Participants also felt the developments in Ukraine would have a major impact on the chances of effective NATO-Russia crisis management. **The future scope of NATO's involvement in Ukraine**, especially the prospects of providing offensive weapons, will have an impact on Russia's willingness to escalate or de-escalate relations with the Alliance. During the discussion, there was a widespread agreement about the need for full implementation of the Minsk Two agreements, with some declaring that the conditions set in Minsk are 'non-negotiable'. Many participants highlighted the importance of upholding Ukraine's sovereignty, but they noted that crucial areas of support to Kyiv are the economy and institutional reforms, not military assistance. There were diverse opinions regarding the rationale for providing lethal weapons to Ukraine. Some participants supported delivery of specific defensive systems. Others were in favour of keeping the option of arms deliveries open as a tool of diplomacy to impact Russian decision-makers' calculus. But no participant argued for a major expansion of NATO activities in Ukraine at this point.

On the issue of **NATO enlargement**, which is also highly relevant for the NATO-Russia relationship, most participants agreed that there is no short-term prospect of moving ahead with membership decisions for Ukraine or Georgia (the membership of Montenegro seems to be on track and was thus not discussed). It was also noted that their relations with the Alliance have notably differentiated over the last years: while Georgia pursued NATO membership throughout different governments, participating actively in NATO operations and implementing defence sector reforms, Ukraine adopted in 2010 the non-aligned status which was dropped only in December 2014.

Georgia is eager to cooperate with the Alliance in finding ways to bring the relationship to the next level. At the time of the meeting, it seemed it was not pressing for major decisions on membership during the 2016 summit. Since then, it emerged Georgia will be asking NATO to grant it the Membership Action Plan.

It will be crucial to reach an internal NATO understanding on enlargement soon, to avoid any last-minute internal attempts to press for Georgian or Ukrainian membership. Several participants felt that the 2008 Bucharest summit decision on Georgia and Ukraine, which was the result of a compromise following such a last-minute initiative, was a major blunder. It was meant to reassure the partners and chart the way forward for the Alliance. Instead it prompted Russia to check NATO's resolve by acting against Georgia.

3. Continuation of a dual-track policy for NATO-Russia relationship

On the issue of broader political engagement with Russia, a number of participants expressed concern that any NATO initiative proposing dialogue may be seen as a tacit acceptance of Russia's aggressive behaviour in recent months, and put the Alliance in the position of a 'demandeur'. According to one participant, NATO has 'spoiled' Russia over the

years by making numerous attempts to accommodate its interests. Others argued that there are specific topics in which NATO could reach out to Russia, provided it serves the interests of the Alliance. Several participants mentioned the Harmel Report, issued in 1967, which proposed a dual-track approach in which strengthening deterrence and pursuing détente with the Soviet Union were to be implemented simultaneously. A number of participants suggested that devising a similar two-track approach towards Russia is possible now. It was also noted that the citizens in a number of European NATO states expect that the Alliance makes at least an attempt to talk to Russia to resolve the crisis.

A division also opened up on the issue of NATO restraining its actions as a way to influence Russia's behaviour. Some argued that some NATO policies in the past, including on Missile Defence development, the NATO enlargement pledge to Ukraine and Georgia, or retention of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, contributed to hardening the Russian position. NATO countries may thus now consider how to balance deterrence and assurance with an attempt to avoid triggering an escalatory action-reaction cycle with Russia. That may require re-thinking of 'how much is enough' regarding the deterrence posture. Other participants rejected the notion that NATO contributed to the crisis or that it should be the first to show restraint, arguing that it would be perceived as a sign of weakness.

On balance, the discussion **showed support for engagement with Russia on selected topics, provided it is done from a position of strength** and self-confidence, with clearly identified aims. Engagement should be constructed as a parallel process to the further strengthening of deterrence. It needs to be methodically prepared internally and in terms of strategic communication to avoid Russia hijacking the process or using it for propaganda purposes.

Military transparency and the pursuit of military confidence-building measures with Russia were identified as possible areas for engaging Russia, based on the principle of reciprocity. Some specific ideas included a broader exchange of information on exercises and future deployments of forces, or starting preparations to enter into negotiations on a new treaty on conventional arms control. The participants highlighted a range of other possible broad areas for dialogue, including **Syria, the Arctic and climate change**. With regard to cooperation with Russia on **counter-terrorism**, while there was no direct opposition to this idea, caution was urged as the Kremlin often uses this issue as an excuse for justifying human rights violations. On **arms control and disarmament**, many participants stressed the vital importance of dialogue with the Russians, but differed somewhat on the likelihood for success. Among specific topics for dialogue, destruction of chemical weapons in Russia and other states, biosecurity and the future of the INF Treaty were mentioned.

With respect to influencing Russia's position through **track two dialogues and outreach to civil society**, participants were widely in favour although many highlighted the limits of

these initiatives. The group conceded that the “closed” model of decision-making in Russia and the authorities’ control over the flow of information makes it difficult to influence its policy. Some participants noted that it is problematic to find the right interlocutors in Russia who would be willing to engage with the West and, at the same time, have influence with President Putin and his entourage.

While civil society and expert dialogue can be helpful in giving us a presence in the Russian debate, most participants agreed that there is **a need for direct dialogue between Western leaders and those in power**, namely Vladimir Putin and his inner circle if we hope to influence Russian policy. Several participants noted the absence of reliable back-channels between Russia and the West which existed during the cold war, and highlighted the potential risk their absence poses. There was nevertheless broad agreement that maintaining contacts with the Russian strategic community, academia and civil society is valuable even if the short-term impact on decision-making is limited. Dialogue is necessary to fully understand Russian attitudes and mentality of the population as a basis for building a productive strategic and policy interaction with Moscow.

Participants thought it of particular importance to **understand the motivations of the Russian government**, in particular Vladimir Putin. The notion that a successful Ukraine would be a threat to Vladimir Putin’s regime received a lot of support in the room, as did the idea that since Putin has surrounded himself with secret service advisers, mistrust and cynicism define his approach to international relations. It was also suggested by some participants that Putin may well be waiting for a change in US administrations before making any diplomatic moves to de-escalate the crisis.

A number of participants highlighted **the need to communicate NATO’s message more clearly in Russia and to the Russians directly**. Closer cooperation between member states and NATO public diplomacy was suggested as a possible way of achieving this, with the embassies of NATO Allies in Russia being encouraged to amplify NATO’s message in Russian circles.

Some participants raised the need to **tackle disunity amongst NATO allies, and in Europe more broadly**. It was made clear by one participant that we need to re-consider how we communicate with one another, including on divisive topics. This is of particular importance given the now forthcoming UK referendum on EU membership, recent elections in Spain and Poland, and the ongoing economic tensions surrounding Greece. Several participants highlighted also what they described as Russian attempts to sow divisions in Europe and to influence decision-making processes in specific countries.

4. Policy recommendations for NATO and its member states

Deterrence, assurance and support for the Partners

- All allies should see **maintenance of the political unity and cohesion of NATO** as the crucial asset underwriting the effectiveness of its deterrence, assurance and de-escalation efforts.
- NATO should continue with implementation of the **Readiness Action Plan**, with a special emphasis on speeding up decision-making procedures at the political level and testing actual deployment of the NATO Response Force in realistic scenarios on the ground.
- There is no need to mirror frequent large-scale exercises conducted by Russia. **NATO should focus on the quality of its exercises** and their added value for improving combat readiness and interoperability of NATO troops.
- The “**Warsaw Strategic Adaptation Initiative**” should build on the RAP implementation and establish parameters for development of the capabilities and command structures needed for more demanding Article 5 missions. The development of Russian armed forces and tenets of its military strategy need to be taken into account when drawing up the adaptation plan.
- A compromise within the Alliance should be reached on establishing **a permanent presence of NATO air and ground forces** along the Eastern flank, most notably in the Baltic States. The scale of such presence will stay below the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act “no substantial combat forces” pledge, but the Alliance should prepare and exercise credible plans for substantial and rapid reinforcement of the exposed allies if needed.
- We must use the window of opportunity created by the crisis to **deepen the relationship between NATO and the European Union**, aiming at establishing a workable division of labour in strengthening resilience against hybrid challenges.
- International **support for Ukraine** should be focused on the economy and institutional reforms. The option of major arms deliveries and military assistance can be kept as a tool of diplomacy to discourage any major Russia-initiated outbreak of fighting.
- Since there does not seem to be wide support for moving ahead with Georgian and Ukrainian membership in the Alliance at the Warsaw Summit, it will be cru-

cial to reach **an internal NATO understanding on Eastern enlargement** early on, and focus on preparing assistance packages for both countries. Georgia's progress towards meeting the Alliance's standards and its involvement in NATO operations should be reflected in an ambitious training and cooperation program, building on the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package agreed in Wales.

De-escalation with Russia

- Since there is a real threat that Russia's use of military brinkmanship and hybrid strategies may lead to a military crisis between NATO and Russia, NATO must make sure that the **military lines of communication** with Russia are kept open and, if possible, expanded.
- NATO should explore initiating a **multilateral arrangement on avoiding military incidents involving** all NATO members, Russia and possibly NATO partners Sweden and Finland.
- The return of the pre-2014 model of relationship with Russia is not possible. NATO should nevertheless express **readiness to discuss selected topics with Russia**, provided it is done with clearly identified aims, and with taking into account the positions of all the allies.
- We should strive to convince Russia that **more military transparency and reciprocal confidence-building measures** would be in our mutual interest: for Russia, they would increase predictability about NATO's plans; for NATO, reduce concerns about the possibility of a Russian surprise attack. Other possible areas for dialogue include **Syria, the Arctic, counter-terrorism, arms control and disarmament**.
- NATO and its members should encourage and support **contacts with the Russian strategic community, academia and civil society**, even if their actual impact on decision-making is limited. There is a need to communicate NATO's policy more clearly in Russia and to the Russians. It is also worth exploring establishment of reliable discreet back-channels between Russia and the West. But to influence Russian policy effectively, there is no substitute to direct dialogue of Western leaders with those in power, namely Vladimir Putin and his inner circle.
- There is **neither the time nor the need to update the existing Strategic Concept**, which is flexible enough to accommodate the adaptation of the Alliance. The Alliance leaders could however explicitly confirm in Warsaw that the 2010 Concept's language on the relationship with Russia reflects the aspirations of the NATO members, rather than the current state of affairs.

For more information please contact:

Lukasz Kulesa, Research Director of the European Leadership Network

Email: lukasz.k@europeanleadershipnetwork.org

Tel: +44 (0) 203 176 2551

www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org

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