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Policy brief

Dangerous  
Brinkmanship:  
*Close Military Encounters  
Between Russia and the West in  
2014*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea, the intensity and gravity of incidents involving Russian and Western militaries and security agencies has visibly increased. This ELN Policy Brief provides details of almost 40 specific incidents that have occurred over the last eight months (an interactive map is available [here](#)). These events add up to a highly disturbing picture of violations of national airspace, emergency scrambles, narrowly avoided mid-air collisions, close encounters at sea, simulated attack runs and other dangerous actions happening on a regular basis over a very wide geographical area.

Apart from routine or near-routine encounters, the Brief identifies 11 serious incidents of a more aggressive or unusually provocative nature, bringing a higher level risk of escalation. These include harassment of reconnaissance planes, close overflights over warships, and Russian 'mock bombing raid' missions. It also singles out 3 high risk incidents which in our view carried a high probability of causing casualties or a direct military confrontation: a narrowly avoided collision between a civilian airliner and Russian surveillance plane, abduction of an Estonian intelligence officer, and a large-scale Swedish 'submarine hunt'.

Even though direct military confrontation has been avoided so far, the mix of more aggressive Russian posturing and the readiness of Western forces to show resolve increases the risk of unintended escalation and the danger of losing control over events. This Brief therefore makes three main recommendations:

- 1. The Russian leadership should urgently re-evaluate the costs and risks of continuing its more assertive military posture, and Western diplomacy should be aimed at persuading Russia to move in this direction.**
- 2. All sides should exercise military and political restraint.**
- 3. All sides must improve military-to-military communication and transparency.**

To perpetuate a volatile stand-off between a nuclear armed state and a nuclear armed alliance and its partners in the circumstances described in this paper is risky at best. It could prove catastrophic at worst.

# **Dangerous Brinkmanship:**

## **Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In recent months, international attention has focused on events in Ukraine: the Maidan revolution and the overthrow of President Victor Yanukovich; the Russian takeover and annexation of Crimea; and the eruption of heavy fighting in Eastern Ukraine, followed by a shaky truce agreed in September. However, in a closely connected but parallel set of developments, the Ukraine crisis has contributed to a significant increase in military tensions between Russia and NATO countries and their partners in Sweden and Finland.

In this Policy Brief, based on open sources, the ELN presents an overview and assessment of almost 40 sensitive incidents that have occurred over the last eight months. The locations of the majority of these are graphically represented in the map in Appendix A. These events form a highly disturbing picture of violations of national airspace, emergency scrambles, narrowly avoided mid-air collisions, close encounters at sea, and other dangerous actions happening on a regular basis over a very wide geographical area. While the majority of the documented incidents have taken place in the Baltic Sea, there have also been ‘near misses’ in the High North, Black Sea and along the U.S. and Canadian borders.

After describing some of the most notable and serious incidents, this brief goes on to set out a series of policy recommendations aimed at stabilising the situation and avoiding the evident danger of serious military escalation.

### **2. CLOSE RUSSIA-WEST MILITARY ENCOUNTERS IN 2014: AN INCIDENT REPORT**

Compared with the pre-March 2014 period, the situation has changed both with regards to the number of relevant incidents, and their gravity. Concerning the numbers, NATO officials indicated in late October 2014 that this year NATO states have already conducted over 100 intercepts of Russian aircraft, three times more than in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Between January and September, the NATO Air Policing Mission conducted 68 ‘hot’ identification and interdiction

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Cover Photo - A Russian SU-27 Flanker aircraft banks away with a RAF Typhoon in the background. RAF Typhoons were scrambled on 17 June 2014 to intercept multiple Russian aircraft in international airspace as part of NATO’s ongoing Baltic Air Policing Mission. [UK Ministry of Defence, Flickr](#) Accessed 05 November, 2014

<sup>1</sup> NATO Tracks Large-Scale Russian Air Activity in Europe; *Allied Command Operations release*, 29th October 2014; <http://www.aco.nato.int/nato-tracks-largescale-russian-air-activity-in-europe.aspx> Accessed 30 October, 2014.

missions along the Lithuanian border alone, and Latvia recorded more than 150 incidents of Russian planes approaching its airspace.<sup>2</sup> Estonia recorded 6 violations of its airspace in 2014, as compared to 7 violations overall for the entire period between 2006 and 2013.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the nature of the incidents, this Brief makes a distinction between three categories of events, namely those that can be described as near routine, those that are serious with an evident risk of escalation, and those incidents that are best described as high risk. We describe incidents in each of these categories in the sections that follow, starting with those of highest risk.

### *2.1 High Risk Incidents*

High Risk incidents, in our view, are defined as those with a high probability of causing casualties or a direct military confrontation between Russia and Western states.

We have identified three such cases in the relevant time period:

- **On 3 March 2014** a close encounter occurred between a SAS passenger plane taking off from Copenhagen and a Russian reconnaissance aircraft which did not transmit its position. The incident happened 50 miles south east of Malmö. A collision was apparently avoided thanks only to good visibility and the alertness of the passenger plane pilots. The SAS 737 plane was carrying 132 passengers to Rome.<sup>4</sup> Had these two planes collided with a major loss of civilian life comparable to the tragedy of flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine, the result would almost certainly have been a new round of western sanctions on Russia and increased NATO patrolling in the Baltic Sea but also, and perhaps more importantly, the classification of further un-logged or blind air activity over Europe as a possible threat to life requiring forceful pre-emptive interdiction.
- **On 5 September 2014** an Estonian security service operative, Eston Kohver, was abducted by Russian agents from an Estonian border post, on Estonian, and therefore NATO, territory. He was later taken to Moscow and accused of espionage. The incident itself involved communications jamming and the use of smoke

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<sup>2</sup>Russian air incursions rattle Baltic states, *The Financial Times*, 24th September 2014; <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9d016276-43c3-11e4-baa7-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3HQnlpB0> (subscription required); accessed 29 October, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Russian planes straying into foreign airspace, *Postimees*, 23 September 2014; <http://news.postimees.ee/2930271/russian-planes-straying-into-foreign-air-space>; accessed 29 October, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> SAS flight in Russian spy plane near miss *The Local* <http://www.thelocal.se/20140508/sas-plane-in-russian-spy-plane-near-miss> Accessed 29 October 2014; Airliner and Russian spyplane nearly collide off Sweden *The Aviationist* <http://theaviationist.com/2014/05/09/il-20-near-collides-with-sas-flight/> Accessed 29 October 2014

grenades, and took place immediately after President Obama's visit to the region and his repetition of security assurances to the Baltic States.<sup>5</sup> Had the incident resulted in loss of life there could have been dangerous and uncontrolled escalation.

- **Between 17-27 October, 2014** a major submarine hunt by Swedish authorities was prompted by credible intelligence reports of "underwater activity" in the Stockholm archipelago in Swedish territorial waters. Supreme Commander General Sverker Göranson underlined that Sweden was ready to use "armed force" to bring the vessel to the surface if necessary. Russia issued denials and attempted to ridicule Swedish concerns. The major search operation stopped on Oct. 24. The Swedish military stated that "foreign underwater activity" had probably taken place, with at least one unidentified vessel involved.<sup>6</sup>

This incident represented the biggest anti-submarine operation in Sweden since the Cold War and increased Swedish concerns that more aggressive Russian surveillance and probing operations are under way in breach of international law. Had the submarine been found and force used by Swedish authorities, this may have resulted in casualties and a further Russian military response.

## *2.2 Serious Incidents with Escalation Risk*

What we characterise in this report as serious incidents go beyond the previously-established pattern of interaction and the near routine cases outlined below and involve close encounters of a more aggressive or unusually provocative nature. As such this category of incident brings a higher level of risk of escalation.

We have identified 11 such serious incidents. They include 4 separate cases of the harassment of U.S. and Swedish reconnaissance planes in international airspace by armed Russian fighters; 2 cases of Russian aircraft conducting close overflights over U.S. and Canadian ships in the Black Sea; Russian aircraft violating Swedish airspace on a mock 'bombing raid' mission; a mock attack on the Danish island of Bornholm; the practicing of cruise missile attacks against the US mainland; boarding and detention of a Lithuanian fishing vessel accused of illegal fishing in the Barents

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<sup>5</sup>Russians open new front after Estonian official is captured in 'cross-border raid' *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/07/russia-parades-detained-estonian-police-officer> Accessed 29 October 2014; Estonia arrests former KGB officers *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/03/estonia-kgb-officers-arrest> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>6</sup>What lies beneath *The Economist* <http://www.economist.com/blogs/charlemagne/2014/10/swedish-submarine-hunt> Accessed 29 October 2014; Sweden bathes in echoes of cold war drama as submarine hunt continues *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/21/sweden-cold-war-submarine-hunt-russia-vessel-military> Accessed 29 October 2014; Sweden submarine search called off *BBC* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-29752368> Accessed 29 October 2014

Sea; and a massive outburst of Russian aviation activity along NATO borders in late October. Each of these incidents could have evolved into a more serious situation, both in terms of possible casualties or broader political and diplomatic consequences.

More detail on each incident is presented below:

- **On 12 April 2014** an unarmed Russian fighter aircraft made 12 passes of the American warship the USS Cook in the Black Sea.<sup>7</sup> Such aggressive behaviour, if repeated by an armed aircraft, could have resulted in the ship commander targeting the aircraft in an act of self-defence.
- **On April 23 2014** an armed Russian fighter undertook very threatening manoeuvres in the vicinity of an American reconnaissance aircraft in the Sea of Okhotsk. These manoeuvres involved demonstrating that the fighter was armed.<sup>8</sup> Such behaviour is far removed from what would be expected in a relatively routine encounter.
- **In June 2014** armed Russian aircraft approached the heavily populated Danish island of Bornholm before breaking off in what appears to have been a simulated attack. The Danish intelligence service described the incident as “of a more offensive character than observed in recent years.”<sup>9</sup>
- **On 16 July 2014** an armed Russian aircraft intercepted a Swedish surveillance plane conducting operations between Gotland and Latvia in international airspace, and flew within 10 metres of the plane.<sup>10</sup> This indicated a far more aggressive approach to intercepting aircraft than in previous encounters.
- **On 18 July 2014** an American surveillance plane conducting operations near Kaliningrad was chased into Swedish air-space after being approached by Russian fighters. This evasive action took place without Sweden’s prior approval that the US aircraft could enter Swedish airspace.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Russian aircraft flies near US Navy ship in Black Sea *US Department of Defense* <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=122052> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>8</sup> US official: ‘Dangerous’ Russian jet fly-by was ‘straight out of a movie’ CNN <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/03/world/russia-us-jet-fly-by/index.html?iref=allsearch> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>9</sup> Russia simulated an attack on Denmark *The Local* <http://www.thelocal.dk/20141031/russia-simulated-a-military-attack-on-denmark> Accessed 04 November 2014

<sup>10</sup> Russian SU-27 Flanker performs dangerous intercept putting itself within 10 meters of Swedish plane *Free Republic* <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/3210582/posts> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>11</sup> To evade Russians, plane crossed into Sweden International *New York Times* [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/04/world/europe/to-evade-russians-american-reconnaissance-plane-crossed-into-swedish-air.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/04/world/europe/to-evade-russians-american-reconnaissance-plane-crossed-into-swedish-air.html?_r=0) Accessed 29 October 2014; US spyplane violated Swedish airspace to escape interception by Russian jets *The Aviationist* <http://theaviationist.com/2014/08/01/rc-135-violated-swedish-airspace/> Accessed 29 October 2014

- **In early September, 2014** Russian strategic bombers in the Labrador Sea near Canada practiced cruise missile strikes on the United States. The Russian aircraft stayed outside of Canada's ADIZ but this was still a provocative move in light of the NATO summit ongoing at the time. Cruise missiles launched from the Labrador Sea would have Ottawa, New York, Washington, Chicago, and the Norfolk Naval Base in range.<sup>12</sup>
- **On 7 September 2014** HMCS Toronto (a frigate) was buzzed by a Russian aircraft in the Black Sea, with the plane coming within 300 metres of the warship. HMCS Toronto locked its radar on the Russian plane but took no further action as the aircraft was not armed. This incident coincided with larger Russian naval combat training activities near Sevastopol.<sup>13</sup> Such aggressive behaviour, if repeated by an armed aircraft, could have resulted in the ship commander targeting the aircraft in an act of self-defence.
- **On 17 September 2014** two Russian military aircraft crossed into Swedish air-space south of the island of Oland.<sup>14</sup> The Russian Su-24 bombers intentionally violated Swedish airspace possibly to test the capabilities of the air defence system strengthened after previous incidents. The Swedish Foreign Minister described the incident as the 'most serious aerial incursion' in years.
- **On 19 September 2014** Russian officers detained a Lithuanian shipping vessel in international waters in the Barents Sea, subsequently towing it to Murmansk.<sup>15</sup> This represented a clear escalation in Russian attempts at the provocation and intimidation of the Baltic States.

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<sup>12</sup> Russian strategic bombers near Canada practice cruise missile strikes on US *The Washington Free Beacon* <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/russian-strategic-bombers-near-canada-practice-cruise-missile-strikes-on-us/> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>13</sup> Aboard HMCS Toronto for 'Operation Reassurance' on the Black Sea *CTV News* <http://www.ctvnews.ca/world/aboard-hmcs-toronto-for-operation-reassurance-on-the-black-sea-1.2017821#ixzz3E2YOdNIQ> Accessed 29 October 2014; Russia denies military planes approached Canadian warship *Reuters* <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/09/09/uk-ukraine-crisis-russia-canada-warship-idUKKBN0H40CQ20140909> Accessed 29 October 2014; Russians shadow American warship after Canadian frigate 'buzzed' *CTV News* <http://www.ctvnews.ca/world/russians-shadow-american-warship-after-canadian-frigate-buzzed-1.1998265> Accessed 29 October 2014; Black Sea fleet missile units destroy training target near Sevastopol *Tass* <http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/748793> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>14</sup> Russian violation of Swedish territory *Government Offices of Sweden* <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/18833/a/246743> Accessed 04 November 2014

<sup>15</sup> Lithuania and Russia exchange diplomatic notes over detained fishing vessel *The Lithuania Tribune* <http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/foreign-affairs/lithuania-and-russia-exchange-diplomatic-notes-over-detained-fishing-vessel.d?id=65920560#ixzz3EJpBt0sS> Accessed 29 October 2014; EU protests Russia's 'forced' capture of Lithuanian fishing boat in Barents Sea *The Moscow Times* [http://www.themoscowtimes.com/top\\_stories/article/newsletter/508152.html?](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/top_stories/article/newsletter/508152.html?) Accessed 29 October 2014

- **On 3 October 2014** a Russian fighter flew “within metres” of Swedish surveillance aircraft in the Baltic in an incident deemed “unusually provocative”.<sup>16</sup> A collision between the aircraft would have had serious repercussions for bilateral relations and increased military tensions across the entire Baltic area.
- **From 28-30 October 2014**, Russia conducted a major air exercise in the North Sea, Atlantic, Black Sea and Baltic Sea. In a series of developments, aircraft from NATO states and partners tracked Russian long-range bombers conducting missions across this entire area, including a large formation of Russian fighters and bombers conducting missions over the Baltic Sea. All missions were conducted in international airspace<sup>17</sup> but their scale and use of different kinds of aircraft and different zones of operation has added significantly to increased tensions between NATO and Russia.

### *2.3 Near Routine Incidents*

Near-routine incidents are those that generally fit into the previously-established pattern of interactions between Russian and Western militaries, such as fighter aircraft “shadowing” one another’s reconnaissance flights or shadowing Russia’s Long-Range Aviation missions in the vicinity of national airspaces; observation of the other side’s exercises; emergency scrambles of NATO planes to intercept Russian planes approaching the airspace of the Baltic states; or even brief violations of national airspaces. As long as these incidents do not differ significantly from the previous mode of behaviour, they are not likely to lead to escalation. However, the increased number of such incidents in recent months is a reason for concern, as they are adding to an atmosphere of tension which is putting pressure on the militaries involved.

Examples of incidents in this category include the following:

- **On 10 April 2014** two Russian Navy vessels involved in live missile firing exercises entered Lithuania’s Baltic maritime economic zone, causing serious disruption to shipping.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Russian jet flew ‘metres’ from Swedish plane *The Local* <http://www.thelocal.se/20141003/russian-jet-soars-metres-from-swedish-plane> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>17</sup> NATO Tracks Large-Scale Russian Air Activity in Europe; Allied Command Operations release, 29th October 2014; <http://www.aco.nato.int/nato-tracks-largescale-russian-air-activity-in-europe.aspx>; NATO Jets intercept Russian Warplanes, *The Guardian*; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/30/nato-jets-intercept-russian-warplanes>; German Typhoons have intercepted 7 Russian air force combat planes over the Baltic Sea today *The Aviationist* <http://theaviationist.com/2014/10/28/german-typhoons-intercept-7-ruaf-planes/> Accessed 29 October 2014



- **On 9 May 2014** Russian aircraft approached to within 50 miles of the Californian coast, the closest such Russian military flight since the Cold War.<sup>19</sup>
- **On 18 May 2014** RAF fighters intercepted a Russian helicopter and shadowed it back to its parent corvette in the Baltic Sea; the fighters later performed several passes of the Russian warship.<sup>20</sup>
- **In late May, early June 2014** Russian aircraft carried out several incursions into the US and Canadian Air Defence Identification Zones in the Arctic.<sup>21</sup>
- **On 19 June 2014;** HMS Montrose, a British frigate, was sent to investigate a Russian corvette in international waters near Denmark's Baltic coast. HMS Montrose was subsequently circled by Russian maritime patrol aircraft.<sup>22</sup>
- **From 21 May to 13 August 2014,** a series of short airspace violations by Russian aircraft were reported over the Estonian<sup>23</sup> island of Vaindloo.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Russian warships in Baltic incident with Lithuania HIS Jane's 360 <http://www.janes.com/article/36715/russian-warships-in-baltic-incident-with-lithuania> Accessed 29 October; Lithuania dispatches warship after claiming Russian disturbance Bloomberg <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-11/lithuania-dispatches-warship-after-claiming-russian-disturbance.html> Accessed 29 October 2014; Lithuania accuses Russia of harassing ships in Baltic Sea Reuters <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/30/us-lithuania-idUSKBN0EA27U20140530> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>19</sup> Russian strategic bombers near Canada practice cruise missile strikes on US *The Washington Free Beacon* <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/russian-strategic-bombers-near-canada-practice-cruise-missile-strikes-on-us/> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>20</sup> RAF Typhoons sent to intercept Russian helicopter over Baltic *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/10839095/RAF-Typhoons-sent-to-intercept-Russian-helicopter-over-Baltic.html> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>21</sup> Russian strategic bombers near Canada practice cruise missile strikes on US *The Washington Free Beacon* <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/russian-strategic-bombers-near-canada-practice-cruise-missile-strikes-on-us/> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>22</sup> Royal Navy investigates mystery Russian warship in Baltic *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/10922700/Royal-Navy-investigates-mystery-Russian-warship-in-Baltic.html> Accessed 29 October 2014; 15 Russian military aircraft are spotted near Latvia's border *Baltic News Network* <http://bnn-news.com/15-russian-military-aircraft-spotted-latvias-border-115087> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>23</sup> Vaindloo Island is situated in the Gulf of Finland and falls under the air traffic control system of St Petersburg rather than Tallinn. This, combined with an increase in air traffic due to military exercises in Kaliningrad (most of the violations are by transport aircraft), may explain the violations.

<sup>24</sup> Russian planes straying into foreign airspace *Postimes* <http://news.postimees.ee/2930271/russian-planes-straying-into-foreign-airspace> Accessed 29 October 2014

- **In early August 2014** several Russian air incursions were reported into the Alaskan Air Defence Identification Zone.<sup>25</sup>
- **On 7 August 2014** anti-submarine forces of Russia's Northern Fleet reportedly expelled an American submarine from the Barents Sea. The US denied its submarines were operating in the area.<sup>26</sup>
- **In August/September 2014**, Russian naval and air units interfered with the operations of a Finnish research vessel on two separate occasions.<sup>27</sup>
- **In late August, 2014**, multiple breaches of Finnish air-space by Russian state aircraft were reported. In response, Finland has already indicated that it will react more firmly to violations of its airspace in future.<sup>28</sup>

We have logged a further 15 such incidents which can be found in Appendix B.

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<sup>25</sup> Russian strategic bombers conduct more than 16 incursions pf US Air Defense Zones *The Washington Free Beacon* <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/russian-strategic-bombers-conduct-more-than-16-incursions-of-u-s-air-defense-zones/> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>26</sup> Russia detects, 'expels' presumed US submarine – Russian news agencies *Reuters* <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/08/09/ukraine-crisis-russia-submarine-idINL6N0QFOJ420140809> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>27</sup> Finland says Russian navy interfered with Baltic Sea research vessel *Reuters* <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/10/11/uk-finland-vessel-russia-idUKKCN0I00KH20141011> Accessed 29 Octob Russia detects, 'expels' presumed US submarine – Russian news agencies *Reuters* <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/08/09/ukraine-crisis-russia-submarine-idINL6N0QFOJ420140809> Accessed 29 October 2014er 2014

<sup>28</sup> NATO 2014 Summit: Finland 'ready to intercept' Russian planes after third airspace violation in a week *International Business Times* <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/nato-2014-summit-finland-ready-intercept-russian-planes-after-third-airspace-violation-week-1463186> Accessed 29 October 2014; Finland steps up air defense following airspace incursions by Russian planes *The Aviationist* <http://theaviationist.com/2014/09/01/finland-steps-up-air-defense-following-airspace-incursions-by-russian-planes/> Accessed 29 October 2014; Finland's fighter jets on alert as Russia violates airspace *Bloomberg* <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-08-28/finland-puts-fighter-planes-on-alert-as-russia-violates-air-space.html> Accessed 29 October 2014

### **3. WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? RUSSIA'S OBJECTIVES AND THE WESTERN RESPONSE**

All of these incidents are serious in their own right but they are also taking place in the context of wider tensions and increased military deployments along the NATO-Russia border.

In response to the Ukraine crisis, NATO has decided to increase its military presence along its Eastern flank. This has included the deployment of additional fighter aircraft to the Baltic States Air Policing Mission (increased from 4 to 16 fighters), Poland and Romania; more AWACS reconnaissance flights in the region; a stronger naval presence in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea; and the staging of a series of exercises with collective defence scenarios. These measures were extended during the latest NATO summit in Wales in September 2014.

Apart from its military operations against Ukraine, Russia has also been conducting a series of major exercises involving various units from the Western and Southern Military Districts. The geographical extent of these exercises ranges from the Black Sea littoral through the Russian border with Ukraine to the Kaliningrad exclave in the Baltic Sea, and involves units from not only the Army, Navy and Air Force, but also from Russia's Strategic Nuclear Forces. These activities have demonstrated Russian airborne, amphibious, and large unit command and control capabilities, and have been rightly perceived as threatening actions by Russia's neighbours.<sup>29</sup>

This upsurge of activity on all sides and the subsequent increased need to collect intelligence, combined with the general deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the West, has increased the likelihood, and perhaps certainty, that more of these less-than-friendly encounters between the militaries involved will take place.

The increased number and gravity of incidents described also points to a disturbing dynamic. The Russian armed forces and security agencies seem to have been authorized and encouraged to act in a much more aggressive way towards NATO countries, Sweden and Finland. Since this appears to be deliberate policy, Russia is probably pursuing multiple objectives.

At the military level, it may be initiating and using such incidents to observe patterns of response and test the preparedness of specific elements of national and allied defence sys-

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<sup>29</sup> Russia holds military exercises in Baltic in response to NATO *Reuters* <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/06/12/uk-russia-military-exercises-idUKKBNOEN10020140612> Accessed 04 November 2014 ; Russia holds huge military exercises near Ukraine border *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/04/russia-military-exercises-ukraine-border> Accessed 04 November 2014 ; Russia's strategic nuclear forces to hold major exercises this month *Reuters* <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/09/03/uk-ukraine-crisis-russia-exercises-idUKKBNOGYOH620140903> Accessed 04 November 2014

tems, as well as levels of cooperation between NATO Allies and partners. Perhaps equally important, Russian actions may serve propaganda-related and political aims. They serve as a demonstration of Russia's capability to effectively use force for intimidation and coercion, particularly against its immediate neighbours. With regard to non-NATO Finland and Sweden, they may bring home the message that further integration or membership in NATO would cause further Russian harassment.

For NATO countries directly affected, these incidents are meant to undermine the confidence that the Alliance would be able to support them during a crisis. Some Russian actions seem also to be synchronized with major diplomatic events in Russia-West relations, such as a visit of U.S. President Barack Obama to Central Europe, the Ukrainian President's visit to Canada and the U.S., or the NATO Summit in Wales. Other actions still, seem intended to send a more general message of deterrence and demonstrate that Russia has the means and willingness to confront NATO and U.S. forces and to retaliate against the latter's territories in the event of a conflict. There seems to also be an important added value of such operations internally in terms of testing the skills of Russian personnel in near-combat circumstances against a technologically advanced opponent, and boosting the morale of the Russian military.

More assertive Russian actions have been met with a firm response from NATO, at least when it comes to the intensification of air operations. Finland took a similarly strong line after a series of airspace incursions in August. The increase of forces available to the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission has enabled the Alliance to maintain a high tempo of operations in reaction to Russia's actions. The Alliance and particular Member States have in the last month also provided more information to the media about Russian actions and NATO reactions, partly to signal their readiness to respond swiftly to any incidents.

Notably, one of the first decisions of the new NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was a visit to a Polish Air Force base in Łask, which served as an opportunity to underline the importance of strengthened NATO defence measures in the region generally and Baltic Air Policing in particular.<sup>30</sup>

An interesting evolution also seems to be taking place in Sweden, which had initially emerged as a weak player in the Baltic area, with airspace violations and aggressive posturing by Russia (and the violation of its airspace by the U.S. in one incident) taking place without an effective response and with only minor diplomatic rebuke. Lack of political resolve to address the situation and demonstrate effective defence capabilities seemed to encourage more operations against Sweden. However, Sweden has now decided to mobilize its resources and signal a tougher political approach to threats, as seen in October when the 'submarine hunt' was conducted in Swedish territorial waters.

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<sup>30</sup> NATO Secretary General thanks Allied pilots, crews in visit to Polish airbase, 7 October 2014; NATO [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_113616.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_113616.htm?selectedLocale=en) Accessed 29 October, 2014.

This mix of beefed-up military postures along the NATO-Russia border, more aggressive Russian activities, and the readiness of Western forces to show resolve in the face of the challenge, is ripe with potential for escalation. In the current environment, any incident that results in a loss of life or in extensive damage to one side or the other would be likely to provoke a response involving an increased alert level, higher tempo of military operations in border regions, or even direct punitive military action. This could feed a spiral of growing tensions that may be difficult for any side to completely control or stop.

#### **4. AVOIDING UNINTENTIONAL ESCALATION: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The threat of escalation embedded in current developments needs a concerted crisis management response.

**Recommendation 1: The Russian leadership should urgently re-evaluate the costs and risks of continuing its more assertive military posture, and Western diplomacy should be aimed at persuading Russia to move in this direction.**

Russia should return to its pre-March 2014 patterns of behaviour. Some will argue that this is unlikely but the Russian leadership most likely understands the prohibitive costs of a direct military conflict with NATO countries and has a strong interest in avoiding such a direct confrontation, the end consequences of which could not be predicted.

Nevertheless, Russian leaders currently seem to be assuming that Western countries would back off from direct confrontation if an incident spirals out of control, and therefore Russia can continue with a more assertive policy. This is an unwise assumption and a gamble at best.

Besides that, Russian actions have resulted so far in an unprecedented mobilization of NATO and adjustments of Swedish and Finnish defence policy, contrary to any Russian expectations of appeasement. A key challenge for Western diplomacy now therefore is to combine clear red lines in relation to Russian behaviour, increases in NATO force deployments and a strengthened deterrence posture, with efforts to persuade Russia to end its military posturing in its own, as well as everyone else's, national security interests.

This is all the more important because current crisis management arrangements are inadequate. The NATO-Russia Council has barely met since the crisis in Ukraine erupted. Despite some phone contact between senior Russian and NATO military officials, there are also currently few, if any effective exchanges of information on military deployments in the Euro-Atlantic area. EU-Russia crisis management arrangements also do not exist.

While many have commented on the fact that we have entered a new period of confrontation in relations with Russia, few have commented on the need for that confrontation to be managed or on the steps necessary to manage it.

In our view, a diplomatic dialogue with Russia about the danger of what is going on is vital. In addition, a number of additional crisis management steps now need to be understood and operationalised, not only in Moscow, but across the Euro-Atlantic area. These include:

**Recommendation 2: All sides should exercise military and political restraint**

Civilian leaders in all of the countries concerned need to emphasise and continuously reiterate a default message of military restraint and ensure that message runs right through the military chain of command. The NATO leadership specifically should make sure that its procedures for handling incidents involving the Russian military and other agencies are universally understood and interpreted throughout the Alliance and are guided by the principle of restraint and adequate response. The less ambiguity there is in terms of rules of engagement, the better.

In addition, political leaders in the entire Euro-Atlantic area must remember that Ukraine is not the only potential flashpoint in Russia-West relations. There are unresolved conflicts surrounding Moldova/Transnistria; Georgia/South Ossetia/Abkhazia; and Armenia/Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. It is in no-one's interest that one or more of these should erupt. Political leaders in both NATO and Russia must use all their influence to ensure none of the local actors involved take steps that could trigger a new wave of escalation.

**Recommendation 3: All sides must improve military-to-military communication and transparency**

All sides should also make sure that reliable channels of communication exist at bilateral and NATO-Russia level to be used for rapid communication in the event of a serious incident. These channels could be used to investigate the incident itself and to communicate to the other side the nature and scope of measures being taken in response to it.

The overall level of predictability regarding armed forces' activities in the border areas should also be increased in order to reduce the current level of tensions. Both sides could and should expand on transparency and confidence and security building measures agreed in the OSCE framework, such as those in the Vienna Document. It may also be useful to begin work on a sub-regional regime for the Baltic Sea area, involving additional mechanisms for consultation in the case of unusual military activities, information exchange on troop deployments and exercise schedules, inspections and evaluation visits, and notification and observation of exercises.

Some will argue that these measures are difficult to see in the current political climate, but by taking them, political leaders can take the fear and threat of a short warning military attack by one party on another off the table. The alternative is to perpetuate a situation in which mistrust, fear and shortened leadership decision times characterise a volatile stand-off between a nuclear armed state and a nuclear armed alliance. To perpetuate that reality in the circumstances described in this report is risky at best. At worst it could prove catastrophic.

*The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s), and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Leadership Network or any of its members. The ELN's aim is to encourage debates that will help develop Europe's capacity to address the pressing foreign, defence, and security challenges of our time.*

## APPENDIX A: Russia – NATO Close Encounters – Baltic and North Sea



High risk incidents are shown in Red

Serious incidents are shown in Yellow

Near-routine incidents are shown in Blue

Miscellaneous incidents are shown in Green

This map details the geographical spread and threat level of incidents involving the Russian military and the forces of NATO and its partner states in the Baltic and North Sea area. An interactive version of [the map can be accessed here](#).



## APPENDIX B: Additional Near-Routine incidents

### 1. Air Incident

**Date:** 20/04/14

**States Involved:** Sweden; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** Russian recon aircraft observes Swedish military installations. Unclear if there was a Swedish response.<sup>31</sup>

### 2. Air Incident

**Date:** 23/04/14

**States Involved:** Netherlands; Russia

**Geographical Region:** North Sea

**Incident Details:** Russian aircraft entered Dutch airspace before being intercepted by Dutch fighter aircraft.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Air Incident

**Date:** 24/04/14

**States Involved:** United Kingdom; Russia

**Geographical Region:** North Sea

**Incident Details:** RAF fighters intercept and shadow Russian aircraft in international airspace.<sup>33</sup>

### 4. Air Incident

**Date:** 28/04/14

**States Involved:** United States; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** NATO Baltic Air Policing force scrambled to intercept Russian aircraft in international airspace.<sup>34</sup>

### 5. Air Incident

**Date:** 17/06/14

**States Involved:** United Kingdom; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

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<sup>31</sup> Spionplan nära svensk övning *SvD Nyheter* [http://www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/spionplan-nara-svensk-ovning\\_8119816.svd](http://www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/spionplan-nara-svensk-ovning_8119816.svd) Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>32</sup> Dutch fighter jets intercept 2 Russian bombers in their airspace *CNN* <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/23/world/europe/russian-bombers-intercepted/> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>33</sup> RAF fighter jets scrambled to investigate Russian planes *BBC* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27130125> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>34</sup> Latvian Army *Twitter* [https://twitter.com/Latvijas\\_armija/status/460860368622198784](https://twitter.com/Latvijas_armija/status/460860368622198784) Accessed 29 October 2014

**Incident Details:** RAF fighters intercept a Russian air formation in international airspace.<sup>35</sup>

## 6. Air Incident

**Date:** 12/06/14

**States Involved:** Multiple NATO; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** NATO fighters intercept Russian aircraft in international airspace near Latvia.<sup>36</sup>

## 7. Air Incident

**Date:** 01/08/14

**States Involved:** Poland; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** Polish fighters of the NATO Baltic air-policing mission intercepted Russian aircraft flying near Estonia air-space.<sup>37</sup>

## 8. Air Incident

**Date:** 28/08/14

**States Involved:** Unknown NATO; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** No details beyond aircraft type except that incident took place over the Baltic.<sup>38</sup>

## 9. Air Incident

**Date:** 11/09/14

**States Involved:** Canada; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** Canadian interception of Russian aircraft in international airspace.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Royal Air Force Typhoons intercept Russian aircraft *Royal Air Force* <http://www.raf.mod.uk/news/archive/baltic-air-policing-18062014> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>36</sup> UK says jets were scrambled to see off Russian planes near Baltics *Reuters* <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/06/18/uk-britain-nato-baltic-idUKKBN0ET1X520140618> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>37</sup> NATO fighter jets escort Russian aircraft from Lithuania *The Lithuania Tribune* <http://en.delfi.lt/lithuania/defence/nato-fighter-jets-escort-russian-aircraft-from-lithuania.d?id=65454778#ixzz3E3WJztwZ> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>38</sup> NATO air patrol intercepts more Russian planes *LSM.lv* <http://www.lsm.lv/en/article/politics/bap-intercepts-russias-military-aircraft-over-baltic-skies.a96219/> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>39</sup> Canadian fighter jets intercept Russian military aircraft in *Baltics National Post* <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2014/09/29/matthew-fisher-canadian-fighter-jets-intercept-russian-military-aircraft-in-baltics/> Accessed 29 October 2014

## 10. Air Incident

**Date:** 17-18/09/14

**States Involved:** United States; Canada; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Arctic

**Incident Details:** Russian jets entered the ADIZ off the coast of Alaska (officials say such incidents happen around 10 times a year) on two separate occasions, once on the evening of Wednesday 17th Sep (USA ADIZ) and once on the morning of Thursday 18th Sep (Canadian ADIZ, Beaufort Sea). The Russian planes were intercepted by American and Canadian fighters. These incidents coincide with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's visits to Ottawa and Washington.<sup>40</sup>

## 11. Air Incident

**Date:** 19/09/14

**States Involved:** United Kingdom; Russia

**Geographical Region:** North Sea

**Incident Details:** RAF shadow Russian aircraft in international airspace.<sup>41</sup>

## 12. Maritime Incident

**Date:** 29/09/14

**States Involved:** Latvia; Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** Latvian forces observe Russian warship operating 14 miles from Latvian territorial waters; article observes that Russian jets and warships have been detected 173 times near Latvia's borders as of September 1.<sup>42</sup>

## 13. Air Incident

**Date:** 20/10/14

**States Involved:** Lithuania (Canadian CF-18); Russia

**Geographical Region:** Baltic

**Incident Details:** Baltic Air Policing interception of Russian surveillance Il-20 aircraft in international airspace.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Six Russian fighter jets intercepted off Alaska BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-29288277> Accessed 29 October 2014; Russian nuclear bombers buzz Alaska, N. Europe *The Washington Free Beacon* <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/russian-nuclear-bombers-buzz-northern-europe/> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>41</sup> RAF Typhoons scramble to long-range Russian bombers *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11108857/RAF-Typhoons-scramble-to-long-range-Russian-bombers.html> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>42</sup> Russian navy ship spotted near Latvian waters *The Baltic Times* <http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/35597/#.VDUXx2ddWlw> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>43</sup> NATO intercepts Russian jets over *Baltic Sea Mail Online* <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2801825/NATO-intercepts-Russian-jets-Baltic-Sea.html> Accessed 29 October 2014

**14. Air Incident****Date:** 21/10/14**States Involved:** Estonia (Portugal); Russia**Geographical Region:** Baltic**Incident Details:** Baltic Air Policing (Portuguese F-16) intercepts Russian Il-20 surveillance aircraft which entered Estonian airspace next to the island of Saaremaa for about a minute.<sup>44</sup>**15. Air Incident****Date:** 31/10/14**States Involved:** Russia; UK**Geographical Region:** North Sea**Incident Details:** RAF intercepts Russian aircraft approaching UK airspace.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Fighters scrambled as Russian spyplane violates Estonian airspace *Financial Times* <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8e28123e-5a09-11e4-8771-00144feab7de.html#axzz3GxGUdJsj> Accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>45</sup> RAF intercepts Russian bomber approaching UK airspace *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/nov/01/raf-russian-bomber-uk-airspace> Accessed 03 November 2014

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