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Policy Brief

Preparing for the Worst:
*Are Russian and NATO Military
Exercises Making War in Europe
More Likely?*

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Introduction

Over the last 18 months, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, the relationship between Russia and the West has deteriorated considerably. One aspect of the confrontation, as previously documented by the European Leadership Network, has been a game of Russian-instigated dangerous brinkmanship which has resulted in many serious close military encounters between the military forces of Russia and NATO and its partners over the last 15 months.¹ Another aspect, however, and the subject of this policy brief, has been the increased scope and size of the military exercises conducted by both Russia and by NATO and its partners in the Euro-Atlantic area since the Ukraine crisis began.

To assist the public and wider policy community in understanding the realities of this new and dangerous security environment in Europe, the European Leadership Network has prepared two interactive maps^{2,3} presenting in detail the anatomy of two recent, large scale military exercises. Those interactive maps should be viewed alongside a reading of this brief. The two exercises profiled are:

- **A Russian ‘snap exercise’** conducted in March 2015, which brought together 80,000 military personnel. This began as an operation in the High North centred principally on the Northern Fleet. The exercise was quickly expanded to encompass the entirety of the Russian Federation, drawing in units from four Russian Military Districts. The scale of this exercise and its geographical distribution means it could only have been a simulated war with US-led NATO.⁴ For an overview of exercise locations – see Appendix A.

1 Thomas Frear, Lukasz Kulesa, Ian Kearns, *Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014*, European Leadership Network, November 2014 <http://www.europeanleadership-network.org/medialibrary/2014/11/09/6375e3da/Dangerous%20Brinkmanship.pdf> Accessed 31 July 2015 ; Thomas Frear, Lukasz Kulesa, Ian Kearns, *Russia – West Brinkmanship Continues*, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/russia--west-dangerous-brinkmanship-continues-_2529.html. Accessed 31 July 2015.

2 Thomas Frear, *Anatomy of a Russian Exercise*, European Leadership Network, August 2015, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/anatomy-of-a-russian-exercise_2914.html Accessed 11 August 2015

3 Thomas Frear, *Anatomy of a NATO Exercise*, European Leadership Network, August 2015, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/anatomy-of-a-nato-exercise_2962.html Accessed 11 August 2015

4 Despite the activation of some units in the Russian Far East, the exercises clearly focused on the European part of Russia and the High North. The Eastern part of the exercise might have served to demonstrate that even if engaged in a war with NATO in Europe, Russia would still have the military means to prevent any opportunistic third power (China or Japan) from using the turmoil to attack Russian territories in Asia.

- **The NATO ‘Allied Shield’ exercise** conducted in June 2015, which brought under one framework four distinct exercises taking place along the Eastern flank of the Alliance, totalling 15,000 personnel from 19 Member states and three partner states. These exercises included a major naval exercise in the Baltic Sea, amphibious assault operations in Sweden and Poland, and armoured manoeuvres and other conventional force engagements involving US strategic aviation in the Baltic States and Poland. Allied Shield also saw the first field deployment of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) designed to provide a response to low-level incursions into allied territory. This activity was clearly intended to simulate the kinds of operations NATO forces would need to engage in, in the context of a military crisis or confrontation with Russia somewhere in the Baltic region. For an overview of exercise locations – see Appendix B.

What do the exercises tell us?

Analysis of the interactive maps or ‘virtual tours’ of the two exercises leads us to the following conclusions:

- Both the NATO and Russian exercises show that **each side is training with the other side’s capabilities and most likely war plans in mind.**⁵ Whilst spokespeople may maintain that these operations are targeted against hypothetical opponents, the nature and scale of them indicate otherwise: **Russia is preparing for a conflict with NATO, and NATO is preparing for a possible confrontation with Russia.** We do not suggest that the leadership of either side has made a decision to go to war or that a military conflict between the two is inevitable, but that the changed profile of exercises is a fact and it does play a role in sustaining the current climate of tensions in Europe.
- The focus of the exercises is on what each side sees as its **most exposed areas**, with NATO concentrating on the Baltic States and Poland whilst Russia is focusing primarily on the Arctic and High North, Kaliningrad, occupied Crimea, and its border areas with NATO members Estonia and Latvia.
- The training on each side, though dissimilar in scale (a point we return to below) has **a number of similar characteristics**: the rapid mobilisation and redeployment

⁵ It should be noted that the intensification of exercise regimes predated the current crisis. In 2013, Russia conducted major Zapad-13 exercises and started large-scale ‘snap’ drills, while NATO began re-introducing exercises focused on collective defence in line with the 2012 Connected Forces Initiative. Before the Ukraine crisis, however, there were especially on the NATO side significant efforts to avoid pointing towards Russia as a potential opponent.

of forces over long distances whilst maintaining combat effectiveness in the areas of redeployment. Ground forces are supported by aerial and naval forces conducting joint operations designed to gain air and sea superiority. Once the forces have been redeployed to the theatre of active operations ground activities involve a mixture of high-intensity combined-arms training focusing on a conventional state-on-state engagement, the conduct and repelling of amphibious assaults, and low-level engagements with irregular forces or saboteurs.

There is a **notable difference in scale** between the two exercises, and between NATO and Russian exercise patterns more broadly. While the particular Russian exercise profiled here relied heavily on elite formations such as airborne troops, the ability of the Russian armed forces to mobilize thousands of conscripts⁶ inevitably results in exercises of a size that the smaller, predominantly professional armed forces of NATO countries simply cannot match.

Russia also benefits from operating within a single administrative framework and employing a single pool of forces, whereas NATO exercises, composed of individual state contributions, are restricted *inter alia* by the various pre-existing military commitments of the countries involved and the limited numbers of deployable forces many members of NATO have.

Broader context

The exercises profiled in our interactive maps form but a snap-shot of a much wider set of activities being pursued by both sides which we will document in a forthcoming European Leadership Network report, entitled “Dangerous Deployments in the Euro-Atlantic Area”.

According to our preliminary assessments, NATO is maintaining a high tempo of multilateral exercises along its Eastern Flank in 2015, with additional NATO-related national and bilateral training activities taking place alongside NATO-led exercises. General Jean-Paul Paloméros, Supreme Allied Commander Transformation, stated in May 2015 that approximately 270 exercises are planned to be held “under the NATO umbrella” in 2015, with about half devoted to reassuring the Eastern allies.⁷

⁶ It is important to note that even airborne troops, ‘peacekeeping’ and naval infantry units with rapid-reaction functions contain a fluctuating combination of contract personnel and conscripts. During the last years, approximately 300,000 Russian conscripts were called into military service each year (in spring and autumn “tranches”).

⁷ *Joint press conference with Military Committee Chairman General Knud Bartels, SACEUR General Breedlove and SACT General Paloméros*, 21 May 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_119868.html. Accessed 31 July 2015.

Official NATO data for 2014 shows that 162 exercises were conducted under NATO's Military Training and Exercise Program (double the originally planned number), with 40 state-led exercises on top of that.⁸ Albeit not all of them took place along the Eastern flank, the increase is mostly related to NATO's efforts to adapt to the new security environment in the East and re-assure those allies situated closest to Russia.

Some specific elements of these exercises in NATO member states are clearly meant to send a signal to Russia regarding NATO resolve. Perhaps the most glaring examples include the presence of armoured vehicles from the US Army's Second Cavalry Regiment, as well as British, Dutch, Spanish, Lithuanian, and Latvian troops at a military parade commemorating Estonia's Independence Day on February 24, 2015 in Narva – a town situated on the Estonian-Russian border and, for many, a symbol of the vulnerability of the Baltic States to a surprise attack.

As for Russia, its Ministry of Defence has announced plans to hold 4,000 military exercises in 2015 (this number seems to include all kinds of drills at all levels and is thus incomparable to the NATO figures).⁹ The biggest exercise in the European part of Russia in 2014 was the 26 February – 3 March drills in the Western and Central Military Districts. They involved (according to Russian data) 150,000 army, navy and air force personnel; 90 aircraft; 120 helicopters; 880 tanks; 1,200 other pieces of equipment; and 80 warships.¹⁰

Russia seems set to continue with large-scale snap exercises, since they are regarded by the Russian leadership as a useful tool both for training the armed forces and for political purposes both domestically and abroad. Such Russian exercises are meant to send a number of signals to NATO, its partners and other countries in the neighbourhood. Firstly, nuclear-related and large-scale conventional exercises have served to amplify Russia's deterrence message to the West regarding the 'sanctity' of Russian territory, now including – according to Moscow – Crimea. Secondly, some exercises may be intended to signal that Russia has the means and the willingness to employ its forces for military coercion scenarios against a specific member or partner of NATO, as well as other countries in its 'near abroad'.

8 *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2014*, p. 5, http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_01/20150130_SG_AnnualReport_2014_en.pdf. Accessed 31 July 2015.

9 *Russian Army to Exercise Retaliatory Missile Strikes at 'Enemy' in East*, Sputnik News Agency, 3 April 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/military/20150403/1020430763.html>. Accessed 31 July 2015.

10 *Fighters of Western Military District continuously patrol the airspace in the vicinity of the border [in Russian]*, Russian Ministry of Defence website, 27 February 2014, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11905664@egNews. Accessed 31 July 2015

Causes for concern

Both NATO and Russia are **keen to emphasise that their exercises are defensive in nature**. This may well be true. Nevertheless, the worsening political relationship between NATO and Russia now appears to be bringing with it **an action-reaction cycle in terms of military exercises**.

It is our contention, that this is a dangerous dynamic for two reasons:

First, while one side may aim its actions at strengthening deterrence and preparing for defensive actions, the other side perceives the same exercises as provocative and deliberate aggravation of the crisis. In the current climate of mistrust, the exercises can feed uncertainty in an almost classic illustration of the 'security dilemma' written about by many scholars of international affairs. This uncertainty is further aggravated and elevated into a sense of unpredictability when the exercises are not pre-notified or publicly announced beforehand, as is apparently the case with a number of Russian exercises.

Second, in our view another effect of such heightened activity is an increased risk of the dangerous military encounters between Russian and Western military units of the sort documented by the European Leadership Network in November 2014 and updated since.¹¹ Some of these incidents and near misses have been connected with increasingly close surveillance of each side's exercises. For example, there were reports that Russian Su-30 and Su-24 bombers approached close to NATO warships exercising in the Black Sea in March 2015.¹² Also, a number of NATO interceptions of Russian aircraft and ships moving between the Kaliningrad exclave and mainland Russia have been a consequence of ongoing Russian exercises.¹³ This has also been the cause of several Russian breaches of Finnish and Estonian airspace.¹⁴

11 See footnote 1.

12 *Naval aviation's Su-30 and Su-24 tail NATO ships in the Black Sea [in Russian]* RIA Novosti, 4 March 2015, http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20150304/1050829262.html#ixzz3TPbPOuXx, and Thomas Frear, Łukasz Kulesa, Ian Kearns *Russia – West Brinkmanship Continues* http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/russia--west-dangerous-brinkmanship-continues-_2529.html.

13 For example see Near-Routine incidents 1, 6, 9, and 22 from *List of Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West, March 2014 – March 2015*, <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2015/03/11/4264a5a6/ELN%20Russia%20-%20West%20Full%20List%20of%20Incidents.pdf>. Accessed 31 July 2015

14 Gianluca Mezzofiore, *Nato 2014 Summit: Finland 'Ready to Intercept' Russian Planes after Third Airspace Violation in a Week*, IBTimes, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/nato-2014-summit-finland-ready-intercept-russian-planes-after-third-airspace-violation-week-1463186>. Accessed 31 July 2015

Recommendations

In our view, the implementation of the following **four recommendations** could help to defuse or at least minimise the tensions connected with the increased frequency and scale of the military exercises now taking place:

First, it is vitally important to **increase NATO – Russia communication** with regards to the schedule of exercises. The recent decision by NATO's Secretary General to pass to Russia a list of major NATO exercises planned for the rest of 2015 is a welcome step in the right direction, and should be reciprocated by Russia. Such ad hoc measures would ideally need to be replaced by regular exchanges of information. The European Leadership Network's Task Force on Cooperation in Greater Europe,¹⁵ composed of leadership figures from across Europe and including Russia, will bring forward a concrete proposal with regard to this issue shortly.

Second, both sides should **utilise the OSCE channels** as much as possible, along with the existing catalogue of **Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs)** included in the Vienna Document,¹⁶ to increase military predictability. Such mechanisms include prior notification of exercises and invitation of observers (applicable to exercises above a certain threshold), as well as procedures for dealing with unusual military activities. These CSBMs should also be urgently updated to take into account the size and the training patterns of modern armed forces, as exercises are often smaller in scale than notification or observation thresholds. In addition, a pattern of deliberately dividing exercises into parts to stay below the Vienna Document thresholds should be addressed.

Third, it is the primary responsibility of **politicians on both sides to continuously examine the benefits and dangers of intensified exercises in the border areas**. Technical fixes will not be enough. There are reasonable arguments against restraining the scope and intensity of military manoeuvres given what is going on in Ukraine and the acute NATO-Russia crisis. Many claim that the exercises actually add to deterrence by signalling resolve and establishing red lines for the other side. We understand and acknowledge this argument. Over time, however, the 'positive' signalling value of exercises will most likely be diminished, while they will continue to fuel uncertainty and mutual

¹⁵ The Task Force on Cooperation in Greater Europe is a high-level discussion group dedicated to bringing forward proposals to allow all countries of the region to decisively break with the costly legacy of the Cold War and focus more effectively on meeting the emerging political, economic, and security challenges of the 21st century. See: http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/a-new-task-force-on-cooperation-in-greater-europe_584.html. Accessed 31 July 2015

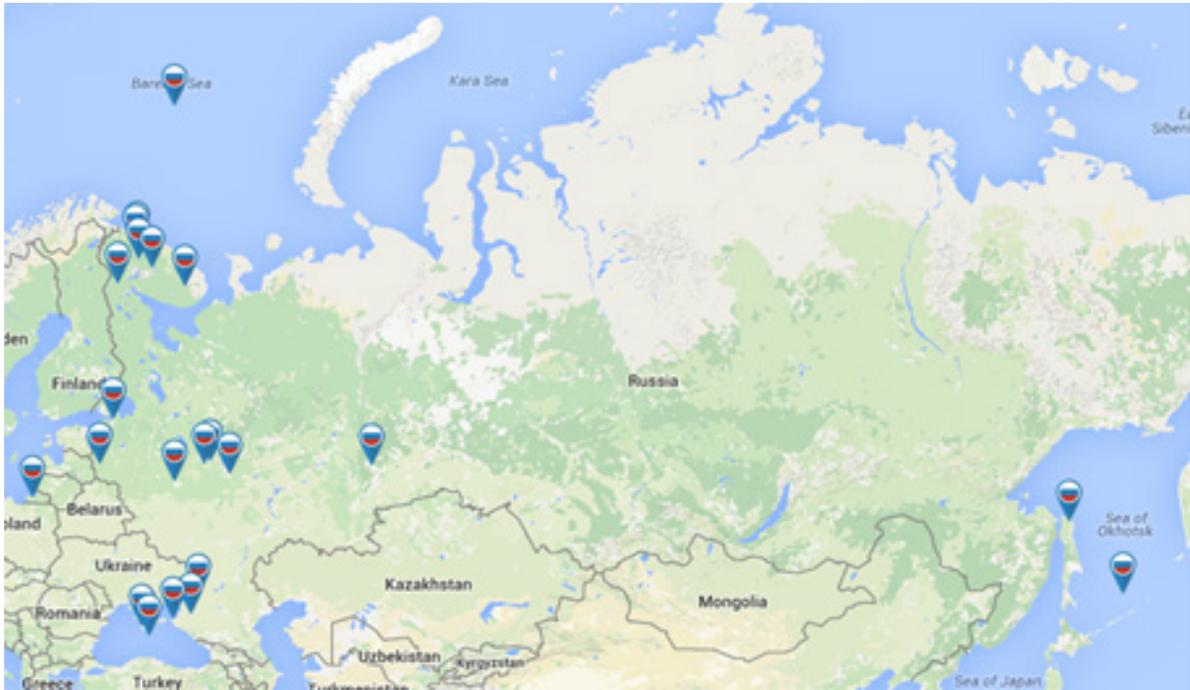
¹⁶ OSCE Vienna Document 2011 On Confidence and Security Building Measures, <https://www.osce.org/fsc/86597?download=true>. Accessed 31 July 2015.

distrust. If Russia or NATO decides at some point that they want to reduce tensions, showing restraint in terms of size or scenarios used for the exercises might be a good place to start.

Fourth, we **should now start conceptual work on a new conventional arms control treaty** introducing reciprocal territorial limitations on deployment of specific categories of weapons, backed by robust inspections. The new regime should also address the challenges connected with the ability of both Russia and NATO to rapidly redeploy forces over long distances, demonstrated by the recent exercises. The events of recent months highlight the need to restore the pan-European system of legally binding measures, which has been seriously weakened in recent years, especially as Russia has de facto left the CFE treaty. It may take years to agree new parameters of a conventional arms control process in the Euro-Atlantic area but that only reinforces the argument that we should start now rather than wait for the situation to get worse.

The opinions articulated in this policy brief 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: Russian 16-21 March 2015 Exercise Map – locations



Appendix B: NATO “Allied Shield” 5-28 June Exercise Map - locations



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