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# Envisioning a Russia-NATO Conflict: Implications for Deterrence Stability

**EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY  
REPORT**

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## About the Author

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# Envisioning a Russia-NATO Conflict: Implications for Deterrence Stability

## Executive Summary

**The prospects of controlling escalation and terminating a conflict according to any pre-planned scenario are disturbingly small.** Although Russia may be better prepared conceptually for it, Russia, NATO and individual Allies would have great difficulty in limiting, managing or ending a conflict on their own terms.

**Conflict between Russia and NATO is avoidable and its probability is currently low.** The current adversarial relationship has so far not crossed the threshold to a direct military conflict. There are scenarios in which Russia might intentionally initiate a conflict, but they are of an extreme character.

Still, **the risks of an inadvertent outbreak of conflict should be the main focus of attention**, as it is the most likely path to a direct clash. Each side harbours fears about the other side's intentions. There are multiple ways of misreading or misjudging the other side's behaviour or miscalculating during a crisis, especially in 'hybrid' scenarios.

## Recommendations for NATO

- 1. Keep thinking about how a Russia-NATO conflict could start, develop and end.** Serious and sustained thinking about the various conflict scenarios could help to identify areas in which the existing NATO posture is not seen by the other side as credible but which also may be unnecessarily escalatory. NATO should regularly re-examine its basic assumptions about the nature of Russia's challenge, its security interests and its policy aims.
- 2. Feed the analysis of a potential conflict back into NATO thinking on deterrence.** Working "backwards" from the likely realities of an actual conflict would allow the Alliance to approach with more clarity some of the challenges and choices it faces when working on its deterrence and defence posture.
- 3. Factor in the possibility of non-consensus actions by NATO Allies.** During a conflict, individual Allies would most likely move to act ahead of NATO reaching consensus - especially in hybrid scenarios. The nuclear dimension of a potential Russia-NATO conflict would most likely be handled by the three NATO nuclear weapons states.
- 4. Educate leaders about the challenges and costs of a Russia-NATO conflict.** The topic may be difficult and out of the comfort zone of most leaders, but discussing a potential conflict in a responsible way would educate leaders about the stakes involved and allow them to make informed choices.
- 5. Understand the value of dialogue and signalling for conflict avoidance and management.** In comparison with the costs of a conflict, diplomacy and investment in coherent signalling are relatively inexpensive solutions. There is a higher chance of avoiding an inadvertent outbreak of conflict if Russia and NATO make sustained efforts to communicate their positions to the other side and are able to use well-established communication channels to manage any emerging crisis.

## Why focus on a Russia-NATO conflict?

*This ELN report draws on the results of a joint workshop organized by the European Leadership Network and the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich on 4-5 December 2017.*

Since 2014, Europe has entered an era of increasing tensions between Russia and NATO. The risks of direct conflict have consequently risen, but they have certainly not been sufficiently and systematically assessed.

The workshop convened by the European Leadership Network and the Center for Security Studies at ETH in Zurich on 4-5<sup>th</sup> December 2017 aimed to investigate how an actual conflict could break out, how it could evolve and be terminated, and what can be done to reduce the threat of inadvertent or accidental escalation, both in the absence of open hostilities and after the outbreak of them. It also sought to identify recommendations on increasing military stability and decreasing the risks of conflict. The participants did not assume that a Russia-NATO conflict is inevitable, but broadly accepted the view that a clear-eyed analysis of the risks involved in starting a conflict is the best way to avoid it.

The meeting brought together think tank and academic experts, former diplomats and officials, and retired military officers from the U.S. and major European countries, including non-Russia-based experts on Russian military strategy and doctrine. It also included selected NATO officials who participated in their personal capacity. To allow for an unconstrained debate, the meeting did not involve official representatives of governments.

The composition of the gathering meant that many of the opinions offered were from a NATO perspective and the recommendations that emerged were mainly directed towards NATO rather than Russia.

This report is thus based on two days of rich discussions and draws heavily and faithfully on

the analysis, ideas and recommendations put forward by the participants, whose invaluable input we would like to acknowledge. However, this report is not simply a record of these discussions and it certainly does not capture all the points of difference between participants. Rather, it is a document that highlights for decision-makers the main problems and challenges that were identified and suggests recommendations to address them. These recommendations have been formulated without attributing them to specific speakers and without discussing in detail points on which there were disagreements among the participants. As such, *the report does not represent the unified views of the participants or of the institutions sponsoring the workshop.*

## Russia-NATO: confrontation, crisis, conflict

The definition of a “Russia-NATO conflict” adopted in the report focuses on the application of physical force against the other side which is met with a reaction, including but not limited to the application of force, in return. This definition includes the activities of regular forces but also the use of saboteurs, special forces and proxy groups, covering, for example, the Russian “little green men” and mercenaries. Also included is the use and counter-use of cyber measures resulting in significant physical damage, and/or casualties. Outside the scope of this definition is the use and counter-use of information warfare, ‘active measures’ of influencing the other side, the application of economic and political pressure including sanctions, as well as brinkmanship activities such as initiating close military encounters on the high seas or in international airspace.

*“Many experts would consider Russia and NATO to already be engaged in a multi-dimensional conflict.”*

This definition may be challenged, since many experts would consider Russia and NATO to already be engaged in a multi-dimensional conflict.

Granted, the Russian concept of deterrence includes activities that go beyond peacetime norms of behaviour, and Moscow actively seeks to manipulate the conflict threshold to extend the “grey zone” between peace and war. In this sense, any effort to construct too narrow a concept of a conflict may play into Russian hands. At the same time, it is clearly not the case that the physical application of force is treated as just another tool in the Russian toolbox to be used interchangeably with other measures in its confrontation with the West. There thus remains a threshold beyond which the current confrontation would turn into a conflict, which - on the NATO side - may lead to the activation of Article 5 commitments and also trigger specific actions at the national level.

### **Threat assessments: Why would Russia or NATO initiate a conflict?**

The two sides have divergent threat perceptions and consequently the assumptions they make with regards to a possible trigger of a conflict are different. It is difficult to envisage a scenario wherein NATO or any of its member states initiate a conflict with Russia. But it can be argued that the worldview and threat perception of Moscow’s decision-makers may result in a strategic blunder by Russia or misperception of NATO’s actions before or during a crisis, leading to a decision to initiate a conflict.

The Russian leadership would never take such a decision lightly. President Putin and other decision-makers are aware of the risks to Russia as a country, and to the current regime, stemming from a major war with a US-led alliance - a war which might involve the use of nuclear weapons. Even though Russia has been willing to use force in different theatres of operations where it encountered NATO- or US-supported forces (Georgia, Ukraine, Syria) and probe NATO itself, it has so far avoided a direct conflict with NATO countries.

Russia may be contemplating scenarios of limited attack or incursion to “break” the Alliance’s cohesion and thus trigger its political disintegration (taking advantage of a broader internal crisis in the West). But there is no evidence to support the

view that this is a plan seriously considered by the Kremlin in the current political environment.

With all these caveats, Moscow might nevertheless consider initiating a conflict with NATO in the following circumstances:

#### **SCENARIO 1: Perceived necessity of a preventive strike**

This might come as a consequence of the Russian leadership concluding that either a particular development or a totality of developments in different domains will result in the West gaining a decisive strategic advantage over Russia, opening the way for Western coercion, attack, or the initiation of “regime change”. Such developments might include the rise of a powerful internal opposition movement or regional irredentism, a major concentration of forces or a qualitative upgrade of NATO offensive potential directed at Russia, or the perceived emergence of a direct challenge to Russian command and control or nuclear deterrence potential. A Russian siege mentality and the level of paranoia of the leadership, fuelled by memories of Kosovo and Libya and strengthened by a selective information feed, could play a role in forming a picture of an inevitable conflict and push Russian leaders towards “preventive” action. The conditions for reaching such a conclusion would however be extreme. It would probably come only after the leadership concluded that other measures for countering Western advances have been exhausted.

#### **SCENARIO 2: Internal legitimacy crisis of the regime**

This might involve the initiation of a “small victorious war” for national consolidation purposes or come as a result of a deepening internal political or economic crisis. Yet, the depth of the internal crisis which would force Russia to attack NATO would need to be enormous to make it an appealing option. With regards to the manufacturing of a “small victorious war”, Russian history (and the Russo-Japanese war specifically) might advise against such a course of action, as it might end in humiliation rather than victory. There would also be other, weaker opponents to engage if the current or a new leadership sought legitimacy

through successful military operations abroad, with the Syrian intervention as an example. One development to watch might be the emergence of a “party of war” within the Russian leadership at the end of the Putin era or in the post-Putin period which might push for a more assertive military confrontation with the West.

### **SCENARIO 3: Inadvertent conflict**

This may be the most likely scenario for the breakout of conflict. The probability of an inadvertent conflict is greatly increased not only by the close proximity of Russian and NATO forces, but also by the fact that Russia and NATO have been adapting their military postures towards early reaction, thus making rapid escalation more likely to happen. There are multiple ways in which both sides can misread or misjudge the developments and actions of the other side during a crisis. This may be made more likely by the high level of mistrust and also the fear of losing a confrontation. Russia might be afraid of the internal consequences of a display of weakness and loss of face if it backed down during a crisis. For NATO, a perception that it was outsmarted by Russia because it did not show enough resolve could have fateful consequences for the future of the Alliance. That in itself is likely to stiffen NATO’s resolve. While NATO might be more willing to pause and re-assess the situation, it would be under severe pressure from some Allies, and also its military commanders, to increase the readiness of its forward deployed forces and move reinforcements in before Russia denies NATO such an option.

*“There are multiple ways in which both sides can misread or misjudge the actions of the other side during a crisis.”*

Also, while Russia and to an increasing extent NATO are trying to coordinate cross-domain actions for maximum effect, the dynamics of cross-domain escalation will be difficult to control. Thus, caught in an action-reaction dynamic to which they have contributed but are not able to control, the sides could decide to move to the level of a military

conflict. Even more worryingly, such a passage from crisis to conflict might be sparked by the actions of regional actors or military commanders at local levels or come as a consequence of an unexpected incident or accident

As a consequence, both sides can, in the “fog” of a crisis, end up attributing more malign intentions to limited or inadvertent actions by the opponent, assuming the opponents’ goals to be more extensive than they appear, and extending their own objectives as the crisis expands.

### **Military doctrine and exercises: How would Russia and NATO fight each other?**

There are lessons to be learned from how NATO and Russia conceptually approach a military crisis and conflict between them and how they plan and prepare for it through deployments and exercises.

With regards to Russia, it would most likely fight a conventional war with NATO in an offensive manner - even a conflict that it would consider defensive. It would use a comprehensive range of military and non-military capabilities in an integrated way. Recent exercises show a Russian focus on rapid concentration of forces and massive use of firepower to stop any incursions, counter-attack and overcome NATO’s defences, and the increased ability to conduct deep conventional and potentially nuclear strikes.

Russia seems also to assume that any conflict with NATO would include a number of theatres of combat activities along the NATO-Russia flank, and plans its operations accordingly. At the same time, Russia would probably try to manipulate the perceptions of NATO decision-makers by suggesting that it is willing to escalate and that it can be “unreasonable” and “unconstrained” in terms of its conduct of operations in order to push for the early resolution of the conflict on its terms. This might be especially relevant with the Russian approach to showcasing (not necessarily using) its non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities.

At the same time, it should not be assumed that Russia is rehearsing for an inevitable war. Current

Russian preparations for a conflict with NATO and displays of its capabilities through deployments and exercises should be seen as one of the tools in the Russian external policy toolbox meant to deter and coerce NATO countries. Actual war with NATO is nevertheless considered an extreme and highly dangerous option.

NATO's mindset about the possibility of conflict with Russia had to evolve rapidly, from seeing such conflict as an exceedingly unlikely scenario before 2014 to the present situation where such a scenario informs the work of both NATO decision-makers and military planners. At the same time, the focus so far has clearly been on devising and implementing a "modern deterrence" posture meant to dissuade the Russian leadership from initiating a conflict by displaying NATO resolve and unity (including through increasing the possibility of an early involvement of troops from all major NATO countries in defence of Alliance territory), and raising the prospect of subsequent punishment and eventual conventional defeat of Russian forces due to NATO's overall military advantage. Work has progressed on the "defence" part of NATO preparations: increasing readiness, mobility, availability and training of heavy reinforcement forces and the development of capabilities needed to defeat Russia militarily. But NATO is not presently ready to deny Russia the achievement of its goals in certain military contingences, and also cannot be certain to prevail in a longer conventional campaign scenario, notwithstanding its overall conventional advantage over Russian forces.

*"NATO is not presently ready to deny Russia the achievement of its goals in certain military contingences."*

This presents a window of vulnerability that Russia might, in certain scenarios discussed above, decide to exploit. The mismatch between the sophisticated conceptualization of a conflict with NATO by Moscow and the "work in progress" state of NATO defence preparations could conceivably create an incentive for Russia to

act. And the threat of retaliatory punishment could lack credibility given the limited immediate availability of offensive weapon systems capable of striking back (especially if the US forces are engaged elsewhere) and the increasing quality of Russian defences. Russia will also have the means to strike NATO back in kind.

However, the current NATO posture is based not only on the bleak political and budgetary realities, but also allows NATO to project itself as a force of restraint, mindful of the dangers of a conflict. That may be seen as weakness by many, but it increases the legitimacy of the Alliance's actions in the eyes of its members' populations and parliaments. Despite the caveats, deterrence through the threat of punishment remains a powerful tool. During such a conflict the US-led Alliance would utilize its strong points in terms of offensive air, naval, cyber, space capabilities, and - in worst-case scenarios and probably in response to the crossing of the nuclear threshold by Russia - also its nuclear potential. Finally, it must be observed that the current approach has so far been adequate and effective, to the extent that Russia has needed deterring.

### **"Hybrid" scenarios: trigger for conflict?**

One can envisage a number of "hybrid" scenarios of Russia-NATO conflict where operations which started in the cyber, economic, criminal, or "active measure" domains, below the threshold of conflict, trigger a military response or are followed by the physical use of force. As noted in the discussion on the definitions of a conflict, the threshold between crisis and military conflict may not be explicitly stated or otherwise clear to all sides; and it may also be ignored during a crisis. This aspect is especially relevant in the current period of increased interference in the internal affairs of NATO countries attributed to Russia and of the high volume of information 'warfare' between Russia and NATO countries.

Russia remains vigilant about foreign interference in its internal affairs and the threat of subversion leading to a severe destabilization of the regime. In the past, Moscow has made accusations about

foreign sponsorship of Chechen and radical Islamic terrorists targeting Russia, and has alleged the existence of training camps on the territories of NATO states for activists planning colour revolutions in Ukraine and Belarus. In the extreme circumstances of a crisis, if the Russian leadership became convinced that a non-military campaign against it (which might also involve cyber activities and what Russia calls attempts to instigate colour revolutions) had intensified, this could lead to a military response.

*“One needs to be wary of interpreting all disturbing developments as part of a grand Russian plan.”*

With regards to NATO, some of its members' views mirror the Russian assessment that we are already in a state of conflict, in which the boundary between peace and war is blurred, and that their defences are being actively attacked through non-military means. They are thus concerned about a scenario in which Russia initiates an attack that moves swiftly from non-military to military means. This scenario should be not dismissed. At the same time, one needs to be wary of interpreting all disturbing developments as part of a grand Russian plan culminating in a provocation or use of force. So there should be prudence before any country presses the “panic button” at the national or NATO / European Union level. There should also be close analysis of early warning indicators related to the gravity, intensity and diversity of incidents and to connections between them. The overall political context and state of the Russia-NATO relationship would also be important: what would be the political and strategic reasons for Russia to move from sub-threshold to above-threshold activities?

Individual NATO countries would have a decisive role in how some of the “hybrid” scenarios would play out. An Ally can choose to play down or up the importance of certain developments and incidents; it can seek NATO and/or EU support, decide to respond individually (including through actions that are escalatory), or use a mix of both approaches. The Ally's overall reputation and

patterns of international behaviour can matter for determining whether its “frontline” intelligence and assessments are to be trusted. But given the danger of alliance entrapment, NATO also needs to have multiple channels for corroborating the evidence and assessing developments.

### **Escalation: Can a NATO - Russia conflict be managed?**

Once a conflict was under way, the “fog of war” and rising unpredictability would inevitably set in, complicating the implementation of any predetermined theories of escalation, de-escalation and inter-conflict management. The actual dynamics of a conflict and the perceptions of the stakes involved are extremely difficult to predict. Simulations and table-top exercises can give only limited insights into the actual decision-making processes and interactions.

Still, Russian military theorists and practitioners seem to assume that a conflict with NATO can be managed and controlled in a way that would bring it to a swift end consistent with Russian aims. The Russian theory of victory would seek to exploit weak points in an Alliance war effort. Based on the conviction that democracies are weak and their leaders and populations are risk-averse, Russia may assume that its threats of horizontal or vertical escalation could be particularly effective. It would also try to bring home the notion that it has much higher stakes in the conflict (regime survival) than a majority of the NATO members involved, and thus will be ready to push the boundaries of the conflict further. It would most likely try to test and exploit potential divisions within the Alliance, combining selective diplomacy and activation of its intelligence assets in some NATO states with a degree of selectivity in terms of targets of particular attacks.

Any NATO-Russia conflict would inevitably have a nuclear dimension. The role of nuclear weapons as a tool for escalation control for Russia has been thoroughly debated by experts, but when and how Russia might use (and not merely showcase or activate) nuclear weapons in a conflict remains an open question. Beyond catch phrases such as “escalate to de-escalate” or “escalate to win”



there are a wider range of options for Russian nuclear weapon use. For example, a single nuclear warning shot could be lethal or non-lethal. It could be directed against a purely military target or a military-civilian one. Detonation could be configured for an EMP effect. A “false flag” attack is also conceivable. These options might be used to signal escalation and could significantly complicate NATO’s responses.

Neither NATO nor its member states have developed a similar theory of victory. Public NATO documents stipulate the general goals for the Alliance: defend against any armed attack and, as needed, restore the full sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states. It is less clear how far the Alliance would be willing to escalate the conflict to achieve these goals, and what mechanisms and means it would use while trying to maintain some degree of control over the conflict.

The goals and methods of waging a conflict with Russia would probably have to be limited in order to avoid a massive nuclear exchange. Such limitations would also involve restrictions on striking back against targets on Russian territory. But too narrow an approach could put too much restraint on NATO’s operations: the Russian regime’s stability may ultimately need to be threatened in order to force the leadership into terminating the conflict. NATO would thus need to establish what a proportional self-defence response to Russian actions would involve, and to what extent cyber operations or attacks against military targets in quite different parts of Russia would be useful as tools of escalation to signal NATO’s resolve. Moreover, individual NATO Allies, especially those directly affected by Russia’s actions, might pursue their individual strategies of escalation.

With regards to the nuclear dimension in NATO escalation plans, given the stakes involved, this element would most likely be handled by the three nuclear-weapon members of the Alliance, with the US taking the lead. The existence of three independent centres of nuclear decision-making could be exploited to complicate Russian planning and introduce uncertainty into the Russian

strategic calculus, but some degree of “P3” dialogue and coordination would be beneficial. This coordination would not necessarily focus on nuclear targeting, but rather on designing coordinated operations to demonstrate resolve in order to keep the conflict below the nuclear threshold, or bring it back under the threshold after first use.

Relying on concepts of escalation control and on lessons from the Cold War confrontation might be misleading. The circumstances in which a Russia-NATO conflict would play out would be radically different from the 20<sup>th</sup> century screenplay. Moreover, instead of gradual (linear) escalation or salami tactics escalation, it is possible to imagine surprising “leap frog” escalation, possibly connected with actions in different domains (e.g. a cyberattack against critical infrastructure). Flexibility, good intelligence and inventiveness in responding to such developments would be crucial.

## Conflict termination

Russian and NATO assumptions regarding conflict termination would most likely not survive the first hours of an actual conflict. Both sides are capable of underestimating the resolve of the other side to prevail in a conflict and the other side’s willingness to commit the necessary resources and endure the costs, especially once both sides start committing their political capital and resources and the casualties accumulate.

*“Russian and NATO assumptions regarding conflict termination would most likely not survive the first hours of an actual conflict.”*

With regards to Russia, Moscow would most likely be approaching the conflict with a clearer concept of its war aims and thus develop better-formed views on conflict termination. It would seek to establish escalation dominance and confront NATO with a binary choice of either accepting defeat or further intensification of fighting. Such

intensification might involve a move to the nuclear level, but Russia would also have conventional escalation options, such as conventional deep strikes.

At the same time, it should be highlighted that Russia is unlikely to start a conflict which involves a high degree of uncertainty about its final outcome and carries a risk of military defeat. Russia cannot safely assume that US-led NATO would act with restraint, nor could it be sure that the Alliance would be ready to surrender and terminate a conflict early. For internal reasons Russia cannot afford to lose a “big war”, so the most prudent option would generally be not to initiate such a conflict in the first place. Such logic could, however, get lost in some of the hybrid scenarios and scenarios of an inadvertent outbreak of a conflict.

On the NATO side, conflict termination has not been the focus of close attention, as the Alliance has concentrated in recent years on strengthening deterrence and probing the issue of defence. As one of the workshop participants put it, “NATO is in the deterring Russia business not in the winning a war with Russia business”. This is not a new problem. War termination proved to be a difficult subject for the Alliance in the Cold War, as it involved delicate questions about maintaining NATO’s political cohesion and dealing with the consequences of major nuclear exchanges. Nevertheless, NATO’s ability to persevere in a conflict should not be underestimated. Opinions that NATO would collapse following a Russian first strike seem to be based more on stereotypes about the weakness of Western democracies than on any insight into how Alliances actually operate during wartime, especially when fighting a defensive war that is perceived as just. Still, it may be assumed that NATO would have major difficulty in setting and implementing any conflict termination strategy based on the intensification of military pressure on Russia, especially beyond the immediate theatre of operations. Individual Allies, first and foremost the US, might have to take a lead in that.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The general conclusions can be summarized as follows:

**Conflict between Russia and NATO is avoidable and its probability is currently low.** Russia sees itself in a conflict or “war” with the West, and some in the West feel the same about the relationship with Russia. Yet the current adversarial relationship has so far not crossed the threshold to a direct conflict. The outbreak of such a conflict is by no means inevitable. There are some scenarios in which Russia might intentionally initiate it, but they are of an extreme character.

*“The risks of an inadvertent outbreak of conflict should be the main focus of attention.”*

This should not be, however, a reason for complacency. **The risks of an inadvertent outbreak of conflict should be the main focus of attention**, as it is the most likely path to a direct clash. Each side harbours fears about the other side’s intentions. There are multiple ways of misreading or misjudging the other side’s behaviour during a crisis, especially if the conflict involves a variety of actors operating at multiple levels and in different domains. An increased emphasis on fast decision-making, rapid concentration of forces, massive use of firepower, and Russia’s blurring of conventional and nuclear domains, introduces inherent escalation pressures.

**The prospects of controlling escalation and terminating a conflict according to any pre-planned scenarios are disturbingly small.** Although Russia might be better prepared conceptually, Russia, NATO and individual NATO Allies will all have great difficulty in limiting, managing or ending a conflict on their preferred terms. During a conflict, it will be hard for any of the sides to take a step back and analyse the strategic stakes involved and the cost-benefit rationale for pursuing a specific course of action.

## Recommendations

### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Keep thinking about how a Russia-NATO conflict could start, develop and end.**

Analysing a possible conflict should be seen not as a rejection of diplomacy or a vote of no-confidence in deterrence, let alone alarmism or war-mongering. It should be treated as building the intellectual foundations to justify a focus on diplomacy and deterrence and to concentrate the attention of both sides on effective risk reduction measures. Serious and sustained thinking about conflict scenarios could help to strengthen areas in which the existing NATO posture is not seen by Russia as credible (which may stimulate efforts to strengthen it) and to identify where it may be unnecessarily escalatory, misunderstood or misrepresented.

There is a need also to establish more channels of dialogue allowing for a serious and in-depth discussion about possible deterrence failure and conflict between NATO and NATO Allies with Russian experts and, if possible, with current and former officials. Particularly regarding the possible triggers for offensive action, there seems to be a wide discrepancy between NATO's and Russia's self-images of being focused on defence and deterrence and the image of an expansionist and aggressive actor which exists in the eyes of the opponent. These images are genuinely and deeply held and should not be dismissed as propaganda.

NATO should regularly re-examine its basic assumptions about the nature of Russia's challenge, its security interests and policy aims, and vice versa. Such an exercise cannot be reduced to a review of Russian military capabilities. The political, strategic and economic context is crucial in establishing whether Russia is declining and thus less dangerous; declining but more dangerous, or not declining at all.

Such a process of regular reflection must be supported by input from institutions and mechanisms tasked with sustained thinking on the subject and capable of conducting outreach

both to partners, and to Russia. Important work on the subject has already been done by a number of think tanks and academic centres, the NATO Defence College and organizations such as the ELN. NATO and its member states have their established mechanisms for analysis and for creating deterrence assessments. But the idea of a dedicated NATO Centre of Excellence focused specifically and comprehensively on deterrence (including deterrence failure) may be worth revisiting.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2: Feed the analysis of a potential conflict back into NATO thinking on deterrence.**

Working "backwards" from the likely realities of a conflict should allow the Alliance to approach with more clarity some of the challenges and choices it faces when working on its deterrence and defence posture.

- **Think beyond the Baltic scenario.** Triggers for Russian actions may be related more to Russia misreading certain developments in the West or miscalculating the stakes in inadvertent conflict outbreak scenarios than with Moscow's aggressive designs. An incursion into NATO's Baltic member states should not become NATO's main preoccupation, as scenarios for a possible outbreak of conflict are more diverse and less straightforward.
- **Factor in the possibility of non-consensus actions by NATO Allies.** During a conflict, individual Allies will most likely act ahead of NATO reaching consensus on the activation of Article 5 or some of the pre-Article 5 mobilization measures - especially in hybrid scenarios. Similarly, the nuclear dimension of a potential Russia-NATO conflict would most likely be handled by the three NATO nuclear weapon possessors. Prior actions by individual Allies could be valuable to signal readiness to respond to Russia's actions and could be a way to spur the Alliance into action. However, if this went too far it might split the Alliance. The obvious preference is for NATO to act as a whole. Yet, such

non-consensus, individual or coalition of the willing scenarios should be discussed between the Allies, if only informally.

*“For NATO, having a realistic theory of victory may be a way to avoid a conflict.”*

- Recognize and address the dangers of a more robust deterrence posture.** NATO’s modern deterrence approach includes the development of a stronger defence component, with an increased level of readiness of heavy forces. Confronted with the more developed Russian concepts of fighting a conflict with NATO, the Alliance’s capabilities for rapid reinforcement and mobilisation must be credible if they are to play an optimal role in deterrence and diplomacy with Russia. Too much restraint could be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness and, in extreme cases when Russia was actually contemplating the initiation of a conflict, could tip Moscow’s decision-making towards action. For NATO, having a realistic theory of victory may be a way to avoid a conflict. At the same time, NATO’s self-image as an actor that is more responsible than Russia and one that recognizes the dangers of an inadvertent conflict has some benefits, especially in domestic debate in some NATO countries. The Alliance needs to make sure that it builds into its more robust deterrence posture the mechanisms that would avoid making reaction overly automatic and risk losing political control over a crisis and possible conflict. The need to maintain effective communication channels with Russia will only increase as the Alliance moves forwards, since NATO should attempt to minimize the fallout of ‘modern deterrence’ in terms of Russia misreading and misjudging NATO’s actions.
- Be ready to deal with the issues that add to the tensions with Russia.** The Alliance has made clear that it would not offer any concessions to Russia in terms of accepting its sphere of influence or its veto right over

Alliance decision-making. At the same time, a number of past policy choices on the one hand fuel Russian hostility towards the Alliance, and on the other box NATO into supporting policies that some Allies find counter-productive. Further eastern enlargement of the Alliance and the Bucharest Summit pledge on Georgia and Ukraine may be an example of NATO’s self-entrapment. As part of the discussion about the possible triggers for a conflict, the Alliance needs to be able to revisit such topics.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Educate leaders about the challenges and costs of a Russia-NATO conflict**

This may be out of the comfort zone of most of the leaders of NATO countries (who understandably prefer to focus on deterrence and conflict avoidance), but discussing a potential conflict in a responsible way should help to educate leaders about the stakes involved and allow them to make informed choices at the NATO and national levels. Some current leaders have not experienced the Cold War. This is beneficial in the sense that they are less burdened with Cold War clichés, but it also may lead them to under-estimate the chances of a conflict. It is crucial to expose leaders to the uncertainties and risks that would be involved in assessing the intentions and actions of the other side during a conflict and the dangers of relying on established notions of escalation control and conflict termination as policy guidelines.

A parallel process of educating the Russian leadership by the Russian strategic community would be equally useful. Members of the Russian political elite may have inflated expectations about their ability to control the course of a conflict: a dangerous misperception which may be supported by some military officials and theorists.

The education process could involve frequent table-top leadership exercises that introduce various scenarios of the outbreak and development of a conflict in order to expose leaders to the complexity of the decisions and the

limited predictability of developments that they would need to face. Parallel outreach activities could be conducted with Parliamentarians and emerging political leaders who are likely to deal with foreign and defence portfolios in the coming years. The issue of the immediate and longer-term costs (human, political and economic) of a major Russia-NATO conflict for all sides should be discussed as well.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Understand the value of dialogue and signalling for conflict avoidance and management**

In comparison with the costs of a conflict, diplomacy and investment in coherent signalling are relatively inexpensive solutions. There is a higher chance of avoiding, in particular, an inadvertent outbreak of a conflict if Russia and NATO make sustained efforts to communicate their positions to the each other and are able to use well-established communication channels to convey their positions and manage any emerging crises. Granted, such dialogue may be difficult, frustrating and subject to being gamed especially since it would not lead to any rapid changes of policy or attitude by the other side. Yet it remains essential for managing deterrence and thus avoiding conflict.

During a crisis, credible signalling will be crucial for communicating resolve and warning the other side in advance against crossing the threshold leading to conflict. The Alliance should be ready to use multiple communication channels to reliably convey such a message at the bilateral and NATO-Russia levels, and also consider the role of outside actors such as China.

*“Moscow itself should be interested in helping the Alliance to read all its signals correctly.”*

Russia should understand that its current approach of making excessive claims and threats limits its signalling credibility. It is now likely that any warning it would try to convey would be dismissed as a propaganda move or an attempt

to divide the Alliance. The ability of NATO to properly interpret Russian signals is crucial, but Moscow itself should be interested in helping the Alliance to read all its signals (escalatory and de-escalatory) correctly.

Dialogue is most effective if all the sides subscribe to a basic set of rules, or at least understand effectively the set of rules that the other side adheres to. Common rules may not be respected, but they provide benchmarks for communicating to the other side the gravity attached to certain actions, seen as violations of these rules. NATO adheres to rules of international and European security that are based on the existing UN and OSCE acquis (even if its actions in Kosovo and Libya may be criticized from that viewpoint). Russia contests or suggests re-interpretation of some of these rules. But even if the Alliance rejects this approach, it will be important for conflict avoidance to understand the set of rules which the Russian leadership considers to be their policy guidelines.