Deterrence in the Baltic Sea Region
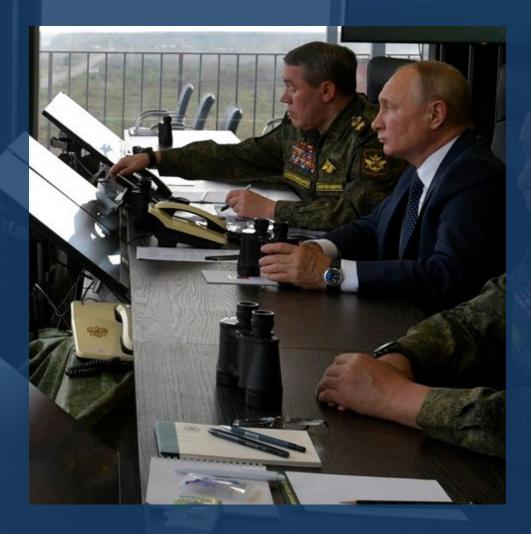
A View from Poland

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Contents

With the collapse of the USSR and expansion of the Alliance to the east, NATO decided that its defense and deterrence policy will be based on the ability to send reinforcements rather than forward presence of allied troops armed with nuclear weapons.

Classical literature distinguishes between two main types of deterrence: deterrence by denial (ability to defend itself and make it difficult for the adversary to achieve his objectives) and deterrence by punishment (ability to impose costs that will outweigh potential benefits). During the Cold War, NATO developed a strategy based on both types of deterrence, which were closely connected. Soviet aggression was supposed to be met with conventional defense but NATO's nuclear doctrine (readiness to use nuclear weapons first) and force posture (US, UK and German land forces equipped with nuclear weapons deployed on the routes of possible attack) created a risk that invasion by USSR/Warsaw pact could escalate to nuclear level. Such strategy enabled NATO to undermine Soviet conventional superiority in European theater, which was used by Moscow both for deterrence and as a tool of political intimidation and coercion. However, the US and NATO's nuclear policy and the risk of escalation created numerous dilemmas, which fueled political divisions across the Alliance, made it susceptible to Soviet propaganda and could weaken relations between the US and European allies (the so-called transatlantic link). Hence, the Allies tried to strengthen the credibility of conventional defense with regular exercises of US reinforcements (REFORGER), exploited the technological advancements of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and adopted a creative doctrine (Follow-on Forces Attack – FOFA), which could further strengthen conventional defense. Nevertheless, NATO did not give up on the fundamental assumption that deterrence of the peer adversary (a nuclear power with significant conventional potential) should be based on the ability to influence his calculations regarding the risk of conventional escalation, which could increase the risk that vital interests of NATO members are threatened and the use of nuclear weapons could be contemplated. It was only after the Cold War that NATO changed its strategy. With the collapse of the USSR and expansion of the Alliance to the east, NATO decided that its defense and deterrence policy will be based on the ability to send reinforcements rather than forward presence of allied troops armed with nuclear weapons. Despite fundamental changes in NATO's strategy and no credible scenarios in which NATO's military could be used for aggression against Russia, Russian propaganda presented NATO as a threat. Conflicting visions of Russia and NATO of the security arrangements in Europe increase the risk that Kremlin will provoke a conflict with NATO under the pretext of acting in self-defense to demand the acceptance for Russian sphere of influence.

The question asked in this paper is how NATO can deter Russia from provoking a military confrontation with the Alliance[1]. The article argues that, facing a determined adversary, the Alliance will have to base its deterrence on the ability to defend its territory, which requires the ability to maintain political cohesion, respond to conventional escalation and fight a large-scale, high-intensity conventional war. It will also have to be able to deter Russia from the use of nuclear weapons for the so-called de-escalation of conventional conflict, which will require a credible capability to respond in kind.

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1   The challenge for NATO is also how to deter Russia from undermining the rules based international order and aggression against NATO partners such as Ukraine. For the sake of narrative clarity this paper focuses on the deterrence of Russia from using different elements of power, including military force, against NATO.

Russia's Strategy – Goals, Means and Ways

The nature of Russia's threat towards NATO in general, and its members and partners in Central and Eastern Europe in particular, stems from the differences in socio-political systems and conflicting visions of regional and international security arrangements. NATO is founded on a common commitment to democratic values and is based on legally binding security guarantees supported with the ability to use US military potential in defense of the allies (mainly US presence in Europe and the ability to send reinforcements). Since the end of World War II, Kremlin's ultimate goal has been a European security system without effective Western alliance, which could weaken Russia's ability to influence policies of other states and maintain a sphere of influence. NATO was perceived as an extension of the US military, which could weaken Russia's ability to exploit its military power as a tool of intimidation and influence. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, collapse of the USSR in 1991 and a short-lived political and economic reforms, Russia's elites started to adjust strategic goals to new post-Cold War realities. Russia's major goal has become to re-assert itself as a major power, with the ability to veto its neighbors' relations with the West[2]. Russian leadership has consequently tried to block NATO enlargement to the East and the development of NATO's structures (commands and forces), which could support the credibility of security guarantees for the new members. By achieving these goals, Russia could establish a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and a military buffer zone or defensive perimeter along its western borders extending to the territory of NATO eastern members.

Since 1990, Russia has been gradually increasing political, economic and military pressure on its closer and more distant neighborhood[3]. It threatened Baltic States with economic sanctions and accused them of "soft ethnic cleansing", which could offer a pretext for military intervention in defense of Russia's speaking minorities. In 2008, Russia attacked Georgia, admitting it wanted to block its neighbor's membership of NATO.[4] In the same year, Russia came up with a proposal of the security system based on a new European Security Treaty, which would give Moscow a right to veto the decisions of Russia's neighbors to join NATO or EU, or even to host foreign troops on their territory[5]. It also started to adjust its military potential (conventional and nuclear) for the needs of different types of conflict, with the ability to fight a large-scale, maneuver warfare in the western strategic direction. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine and fueled a conflict in the eastern part of the country trying to enforce a political solution, which would block Ukraine from seeking membership in both NATO and the EU. Moscow also pushed for close military integration with Belarus in the framework of the Union State. In military terms, Belarus has become a part of Russia's territory, with Moscow having not only the obligation to defend its ally but reserving the right to counterattack in case of aggression. During the strategic level Zapad exercises, Russia and Belarus regularly train scenarios of conflict with NATO, which is triggered by the Alliances' aggression against Belarus.

After the reunification of Germany in 1990, collapse of the USSR in 1991 and a short-lived political and economic reforms, Russia's elites started to adjust strategic goals to new post-Cold War realities.

2   K. Liik, What does Russia want?, European Council on Foreign Relations, 26 May 2017

3   See for instance.: J.L. Black, Russia and NATO Expansion Eastward: Red-Lining the Baltic States, "International Journal" 1999, vol. 54, no 2, pp. 249-266; F. Hill, P. Jewett, *Back in the USSR: Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications of United States Policy Toward Russia*, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, January 1994

4   D. Dyomkin, *Russia Says Georgia War Stopped NATO Expansion*, „Reuters", 21 November 2011

5   Y. Fedorov, *Medvedev's Initiative: A Trap for Europe?*, „Research Paper" 2009, nr 2, Association for International Affairs

Russia as a Growing Threat for NATO

Russian Foreign Intelligence Services assessed in 1993 that NATO enlargement would not threaten Russian interests if the alliance evolved into an instrument to guarantee peace and stability in accordance with principles of collective security[6]. Despite radical changes in NATO's post-Cold War strategy, which included self-imposed limitation on the deployment of troops to new members and the creation of a special mechanism of political dialogue with Russia (the NATO-Russia Council) supported with practical cooperation (e.g. counterterrorism, combating piracy), Kremlin has resorted to the narrative that NATO is a threat[7]. It has also exploited the myth of the broken promise that NATO would not expand to legitimize its aggressive policies against Russia's neighbors[8].

Even before the first round of NATO post-Cold War enlargement in 1999, Russia started to adjust its military potential for the requirements of conflict with NATO. Its military doctrine and scenarios of Zapad exercises organized together with Belarus indicated that, during a conventional conflict with the Alliance, Russia could use nuclear weapons to enforce the end of hostilities on terms favorable for Moscow (the so-called de-escalation doctrine). Despite cuts in defense spending and military capabilities across NATO, Russia started in 2008 a fast modernization of its armed forces[9]. It also increased pressure on NATO members with coordinated propaganda and cyber-attacks, which has been labelled by NATO as hybrid warfare.

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia visibly intensified its aggressive policy under a threshold of open conflict. It includes military activities close to NATO and EU borders, with high risk, provocative intrusions into the airspace of western countries. Russia increased the scale and number of unannounced exercises (from four in 2013 to eight in 2014 and twenty in 2015) demonstrating the ability to mobilize its forces faster than NATO[10]. It openly threatened some NATO states with nuclear weapons and used nuclear signalling during the exercises to demonstrate that. in case of military conflict with NATO. the risk of employment of nuclear weapons would increase[11]. It also disregarded the agreed confidence and security building measures, such as the requirement for the presence of international observers, during the exercises. These activities were complemented with intensified cyberattacks, psychological warfare (e.g. demonstrations of new types of weapons, which can penetrate NATO's

> Russia increased the scale and number of unannounced exercises (from four in 2013 to eight in 2014 and twenty in 2015) demonstrating the ability to mobilize its forces faster than NATO.

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6   Problems of NATO expansion. Report presented by the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Evgeny Primakov at a Press Conference in Moscow on November 25, 1993, in R. Kupiecki, M. Menkiszak, Documents Talk. NATO-Russia Relations after the Cold War, PISM, Warsaw, pp. 144-163.

7   Declassified NATO documents indicate that the Alliance until late 1960 was prepared for the offensive strategic operations against the USSR and its allies in response to aggression. 1968 strategy (MC 14/3) was much more defensive in nature and based on conventional defence, supported with the threat of escalation. The changes in NATO and US strategies and force posture after the Cold War undermine the credibility of narrative that NATO is a military threat for Russia. Nevertheless such narrative has been effectively used for propaganda purposes to consolidate Russian society in support for the regime, divide the West and support Kremlin's geopolitical goals.

8   The last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev clearly stated that there was no such promise. See: M. Korshunov, *Mikhail Gorbachev: I Am against All Walls*, „Russia Beyond", 18 October 2016 r. Nevertheless Russian propaganda fuelled the debate in the West on both "broken promise" and NATO as a "threat" for Russia, supporting Russia's narrative that it has a right for a sphere of influence. It also legitimizes the use of military power against its neighbours, which is presented as self-defense. On the "broken promise" debate see for example: M.E. Sarotte, A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion, "Foreign Affairs", September/October 2014. J.R.I. Shifrinson, *Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the US Offer to Limit NATO Expansion*, „International Security" 2016, no 4, s. 7–44. M. Kramer, *Correspondence*, „International Security" 2017, no 1, s. 186–192

9   M. Terlikowski et al., Trends in Force Posture in Europe, PISM Strategic File, No 1 (85), June 2017.

10 T.K. Kowalik, D.P. Jankowski, *The Dangerous Tool of Russian Military Exercises*, Center for European Policy Analysis, 9 May 2017 r.,

11 *Russia threatens to aim nuclear missiles at Denmark ships if it joins NATO shield*, Reuters, 22.03.2015.

defenses), and disinformation and propaganda campaigns against NATO, which included the narrative that NATO military presence in the new member states is a threat for Russia. By increasing tensions, influencing a threat perception of European societies and exploiting the gaps in NATO's ability to defend itself, Russia has tried to divide NATO politically, limit NATO's support for Georgia and Ukraine, stall NATO enlargement and discourage the Allies from strengthening the defenses of the new members.

Although Russia's aggressive policy can be perceived as intimidation tactics, it has also increased the risk that Moscow could decide for open confrontation with NATO. Large-scale exercises could be used for political signaling to intimidate and divide the Alliance but they also increase the risk of aggression by shortening warning time for military attacks and offering convenient cover for offensive operations[12]. Under the pretext of acting in self-defense, Russia can move forces to NATO members territory and by threatening other allies with long range dual-capable weapons (for example, Kalibr cruise missiles and Iskander ballistic missiles), divide NATO and discourage it from the attempts to regain control over the lost territory[13]. Hybrid strategies, which so far have been kept under the threshold of open confrontation, could facilitate surprise aggression and quick escalation, delaying or weakening NATO's response and political will to re-establish the status quo ante. In such case, Russia would be negotiating from the position of strength and could demand that NATO members accept new legally binding pan-European or regional security arrangements in exchange for the end of hostilities. In this aspect, Russian threat towards NATO differs from the threat posed by China to Taiwan. While China's goal is to take control over Taiwan by political means or through military force, Russia's goals do not necessarily require the occupation of NATO's member state territory. It may be enough for Russia to provoke limited conflict, threaten the Alliance with the escalation and use it as a bargaining chip during the negotiations on the political resolution of the crisis. There are, however, important similarities. Both states may try to establish control over the areas perceived as crucial for their security (Ukraine, in case of Russia, and the South China Sea, in case of China) and when not met with strong resistance they can feel encouraged to use force to achieve their ultimate goals.

The decision by Russia whether to use force against a NATO member would be influenced by a number of operational and political factors, which include the assessment of NATO's military capabilities necessary to defend Allied territory and to fight a war under the threat of escalation up to nuclear level. Equally important would be the perception of US commitment to NATO and the assessment of the Alliance's political cohesion, which might be decisive for allies' determination to launch a collective defense mission. Russia's calculations could be, for example, influenced by the US engagement in a conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, especially if the US would be unable to commit sufficient potential to support NATO collective defense mission, whereas NATO would be divided over the form and scale of support for its US ally[14].

The Baltic Sea region offers Russia a number of options to increase tensions under the threshold of open conflict, test NATO's resolve, provoke a limited war with NATO and threaten the Alliance with further escalation. Baltic States have some Russian-speaking minorities, which could be used for provocation and exploited as a pretext for aggression. Relations

> While China's goal is to take control over Taiwan by political means or through military force, Russia's goals do not necessarily require the occupation of NATO's member state territory.

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12   D.A. Shlapak, *The Russian Challenge*, RAND, Santa Monica 2018,

13   See for example: W. Kipp, *Russia's Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons*, „Military Review", May/June 2001, pp. 27–38; F.E. Morgan, *Dancing with the Bear. Managing Escalation in a Conflict with Russia*, Proliferation Papers, IFRI Security Studies Center, 2012.

14   H. Brands, E.B. Montgomery, Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-first Century, Survival 2020, Vol. 62, No. 4, pp. 157-182

with Belarus makes it possible for Kremlin to use Belarusian security services as a proxy against NATO states such as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Russia can use Belarusian territory and Kaliningrad Oblast, a heavily militarized exclave, to close the so-called Suwalki Gap - a corridor leading from Poland to the Baltic States, cutting them off from NATO reinforcements. The mixture of defensive/offensive capabilities placed in Belarus and Kaliningrad could be used to create an anti-access/area denial zone (A2/AD) over the Baltic States and Poland increasing the risks and costs for the Alliance to launch a collective defense operation[15].

Russia also demonstrates that is has the ability to fight with NATO in different regions from the High North, through the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea regions to the eastern Mediterranean. Such ability is necessary for Russia to defend itself but is also used during exercises to signal that Russia has the ability to fight a full-scale war in many regions at the same time. It also offers the opportunity to provoke conflict in a region different than the Baltic Sea area, to achieve strategic surprise.

After the annexation of Crimea, Russia augmented its A2/AD capabilities in the Black Sea, and tries to take control over Ukrainian territorial or international waters and to deny NATO access to the Black Sea basin[16]. Russia could provoke crisis by attacking a NATO ship, present it as an action in self-defense and, should the Alliance decide to reassure allies and deter Russia by strengthening its presence in the region, use it as a pretext for further escalation, with a viable option of troops landing on NATO shores. Similarly, as in the Baltic Sea region, Russia would use hybrid strategies to influence a threat perception of NATO populations and decision-makers, and exploit political divisions in NATO states and across the Alliance to delay or weaken NATO's response. It would use propaganda and disinformation, cyber-attacks and military signalling. Demonstration of long-range precision strike capabilities, which are able to hit target across Western Europe, supported with nuclear signalling (overflights of nuclear capable bombers, tests of ballistic missiles) would send a signal that Russia is prepared to escalate conflict and, should it face a defeat, it could contemplate the use of nuclear weapons to de-escalate it.

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The Credibility of NATO's Defense and Deterrence Posture

After the annexation of Crimea, NATO members agreed to a balanced policy towards Russia, which is based on strengthened defense and deterrence, combined with a meaningful dialogue on the security issues relevant for both sides[17]. As part of its defense and deterrence policy, the Alliance launched the process of adjusting its command and force structure to the threat from Russia. First, the allies decided mainly to strengthen already existing structures, such as the multinational NATO Response Force (NRF), which could be deployed to a

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15   See for example: R. Dalsjö, Ch. Berglund, M. Jonsson, Bursting the Bubble Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications, FOI, March 2019

16   See for example: W. Lorenz, Strengthening Deterrence in the Black Sea Region, PISM Bulletin, 22 (962), 3 March 2017; D. Gorenburg, Russia's Naval Strategy in the Mediterranean, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, July 2019.

17   Meaningful dialogue gives both sides the opportunity to rise any issue, which is relevant for their security. For Russia it can be an opportunity to seek explanation about the nature of NATO troops deployments to the eastern flank member states. For NATO it is a chance to discuss with Russia its aggressive actions against Ukraine and NATO members. Despite NATO's calls to resume dialogue Russia has declined it since the beginning of 2020. At the end of 2021 Russia suspended its mission at NATO headquarters which further limited chances for dialogue.

threatened region. However, this joint force, comprising of three land brigades (5,000 soldiers each) at different readiness levels, could face a number of political and operational challenges. The deployment of such force to strengthen deterrence would likely be perceived as a bluff since NATO did not have necessary capabilities to fight a larger conflict with Russia. Hence, during the crisis the allies would probably decide against the deployment of such force fearing that they would not be able to respond to possible escalation.

As Russia continued its aggressive policy, the Allies decided to strengthen the credibility of deterrence with the concept of enhanced Forward Presence (eFP). In 2017, they deployed battalion-sized (approx. 1,000 soldiers) multinational units to the Baltic States and Poland. NATO also approved the creation of a multinational training brigade in Romania, which could serve as a framework for the battle group if the threats in the Black Sea region further increased as a consequence of Russian military buildup in the Crimea. The limited size of the battlegroups reflected NATO concerns that Russia would present them as a threat, which could be exploited for propaganda purposes but also as a pretext for aggression in self-defense. At the same time, the limited fighting force of the battlegroups could still be perceived as a weak NATO commitment to defend allies undermining the credibility of deterrence. To further strengthen deterrence, the allies developed necessary command structure elements and conducted exercises, demonstrating that NATO units could be used as a part of a larger, interoperable formation with forces of host nations. In 2018, NATO also decided to support eFP with reinforcements. To do so, the Allies approved NATO's Readiness Initiative, which by 2024 should provide NATO commander (SACEUR) with 30 mechanized or tank battalions, 30 large combat ships and 30 fighter squadrons, ready for combat in less than 30 days. The Alliance also decided to improve its ability to deter threats in cyber and space – the domains crucial for effective military operations. It adopted a strategy on countering hybrid threats, created Counter Hybrid Support Teams and agreed to strengthen resilience necessary to recover from different forms of attack and support a collective defense mission. Last but not least, NATO agreed a set of measures which should assure that NATO's nuclear potential remains safe. It also adopted a secret military strategy - the first one since 1967, and a long term warfighting concept, which will inform the development of capabilities to meet future threats.

These mechanisms and policies were supported with the adjustment of US command and force structures in Europe. The US established forward commands for corps and division size forces, deployed a heavy army brigade (ABCT) with support elements (including reconnaissance and combat air support), replenished military stocks in Western Europe and decided to create a new one in Poland. This adaptation was supported with exercises, which demonstrated that the US would be able to quickly form a division size force in the Baltic Sea region and deploy another division from the US within weeks.

The decision agreed by the allies moved NATO's deterrence to a new level. If NATO and the US continue the adaptation of their forces for a larger, high-intensity conflict they should be able to concentrate units amounting to 10 army divisions (four multinational army divisions in NATO, two US divisions, four Polish divisions) balancing Russia's potential, which can be mobilized on the western strategic direction. This is a signal for Russia that it would not achieve its goals by provoking a limited conflict with one or more NATO members.

The battlegroups, which are led by Great Britain in Estonia, Canada in Latvia, Germany in Lithuania and the US in Poland, and consist of most of NATO members, increase the probability that NATO would be forced to launch a collective defense mission in response to military aggression. Their presence makes it more difficult for Russia to exploit divisions in NATO to block, delay or weaken Alliance's reaction. One of the most important elements of

To further strengthen deterrence, the allies developed necessary command structure elements and conducted exercises, demonstrating that NATO units could be used as a part of a larger, interoperable formation with forces of host nations.

the deterrence posture is the US military presence on the eastern flank supported with ability to build larger combat force. Although numerous NATO states are concerned that the US will withdraw from Europe, the US has been increasing its military footprint on the continent since 2017. Nevertheless, US strategy assumes that US military should be able to fight one full-scale war in one geographical theater and deter another adversary in the other. Hence, European NATO members will have to be prepared for the worst case scenario when the conflict in the Indo-Pacific will engage significant part of US resources. With this assumption, NATO European allies will have to contribute much larger conventional potential for collective defense missions than they have been ready to do in the past.

The agreed decisions also prepare NATO better for the scenarios in which hybrid warfare can be used to weaken NATO and promote Russia's political goals under a threshold of open military conflict or in support of military aggression. NATO investments in situational awareness can make it easier to assess Russia's intentions and facilitate a proper and timely response during escalating crisis. The creation of Counter Hybrid Support Teams offers additional options to neutralize the effects of Russia's malign activities and to demonstrate NATO's commitment to the defense of the allies.

Russia is clearly prepared for conventional escalation, which can increase the risk that it will decide to use nuclear weapons.

However, the credibility of these mechanisms in the eyes of Russia and the allies will be inherently connected with other elements. The first one is the ability to deploy NATO reinforcements, which requires a proper doctrine to overcome Russia's A2/AD systems, superior military capabilities, necessary infrastructure (roads, floating bridges, rail wagons, transport vehicles) and procedures enabling a fast deployment of troops across Europe to the eastern flank. The second element will be the ability of the US to quickly respond to aggression by sending reinforcements to Europe. The third element will be the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent, which will be crucial to neutralize Russia's attempts to intimidate the Alliance with nuclear threats. And the fourth will be the development of the doctrine, which will help integrate the capabilities from all domains (air, space, land, sea and cyber) to achieve operational advantage during crisis and conflict. As the US develops and implements the Multi Domain Operations (MDO) doctrine, it may be assumed that NATO will follow suit.

Conventional adaptation of the Alliance signals that NATO may be prepared for conventional escalation but the credibility of such message is closely connected with the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrence. With NATO being able to defend itself on different levels of conventional escalation, Russia would either have to seek a negotiated solution from the position of weakness or would try to strengthen its hand by resorting to nuclear blackmail. Russian nuclear doctrine and exercises indicate that Russia could use nuclear weapons to enforce the end of conventional conflict, should Moscow face defeat. Even though such a threat may be used only for political purposes, it would also increase the risk that Russia would perceive a nuclear strike as a viable option to end the conflict with NATO on favorable terms. This is another difference between the threats posed by Russia in Europe and China in Asia Pacific. Russia is clearly prepared for conventional escalation, which can increase the risk that it will decide to use nuclear weapons. Such manipulation with the threat perception of the adversary, who is not prepared psychologically and politically (NATO's nuclear policy has been historically inhibited by strong anti-nuclear sentiments in numerous NATO members), to face a nuclear threat, may be an effective tool of enforcing concessions. China's nuclear doctrine and development of nuclear potential seems to be focused on maintaining credible second strike capability, which is necessary to deny the US any political advantage from its superiority in nuclear weapons. However, the development of Chinese nuclear potential may also indicate that China could try to manipulate with the increased risk of employment of nuclear weapons during a conflict to strengthen its negotiating position.

NATO Nuclear Options

In response to aggressive Russian policy and nuclear signaling, NATO decided to strengthen the credibility of nuclear deterrent. The Allies agreed that NATO nuclear deterrent should remain safe, secure and effective and nuclear responsibilities should be shared equally.[18] Although such political statements do not change the major assumptions of NATO's nuclear policy, they will require the adaptation of NATO's nuclear forces for the scenario in which it would be necessary to influence Russia's calculations regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons to de-escalate large-scale conventional war .Since the end of the Cold war, NATO nuclear policy has been based on three premises. The first one is that NATO should remain a nuclear alliance as long as nuclear weapons exist. The second one is that NATO should maintain nuclear potential at the lowest credible level and nuclear policy should be complemented with arms control initiatives. Finally, the third premise is that the presence of US bombs in Europe demonstrates the allies readiness to carry the costs and risks of nuclear policy and creates a link between European security and the US nuclear strategic deterrent.

There is a limited number of US nuclear bombs (approx. 200) stored in Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Turkey in support of NATO nuclear deterrent. These states maintain dual-capable aircraft (DCA), which should be able to deliver weapons over the designated targets, whereas other allies can contribute to conventional part of nuclear mission (SNOWCAT). In addition to US nuclear weapons, there are also nuclear capabilities of France (missiles carried by submarines and bombs carried by dual-capable aircraft) and the U.K (only missiles carried by submarines). Even though French nuclear potential is independent, while UK's can be used for NATO missions, both capabilities complicate the calculations of Russia regarding their response if their vital interest were threatened by Russian aggression against NATO or an EU state. Despite Russian numerical superiority in tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, NATO policy in all likelihood will be based on the calculation that Russia can be effectively deterred by the Alliance having a credible option to respond to nuclear attack to restore the deterrence.

However, the decisions to maintain the credibility of deterrence will require three major types of investments: air and missile defense systems, which will protect the nuclear bases from Russian long range precision strikes; the 5th generation aircraft, which will be able to deliver the bombs over the designated targets; and cyber defense, which will protect the systems necessary for the command and control of nuclear missions. NATO will probably also need to develop a new nuclear doctrine, which will contain a credible option for the employment of nuclear weapon in response to a limited nuclear attack[19].

NATO nuclear deterrence (and reassurance of the allies) has already been strengthened with nuclear signaling. Before the annexation of Crimea NATO organized few exercises of its nuclear forces, refrained from informing that such exercises took place and organized them far from the eastern flank. In recent years NATO seems to have increased the visibility of exercises[20]. This was supported with the exercises of US bombers in Europe[21]. If there is a need to further strengthen nuclear signaling, NATO still has some additional options available. It can organize exercises in the eastern flank with dual capable aircraft from European states

> NATO will probably also need to develop a new nuclear doctrine, which will contain a credible option for the employment of nuclear weapon in response to a limited nuclear attack.

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18   NATO Nuclear Deterrent Policy and Forces, NATO, 11 May 2021, www.nato.int

19   H. Binnendijk, J. Lindley-French, Prioritize NATO's Core Task: Collective Defense, Defense News, 23 November 2021.

20   See for example: NATO Launches Annual Deterrence Exercise, NATO, 18 October 2021, www.nato.int

21   US Bombers to Overfly all 30 NATO Allies in a Single Day, NATO, 28 August 2020, www.nato.int

(including France), which will send a signal of NATO's determination and political cohesion in face of Russia's threat.

As NATO is a defensive Alliance based on defensive doctrine, there will be certain limitations in strengthening the credibility of deterrence. There is a resistance in the Alliance to plan and exercise the escalation and destruction of Russia's defensive/offensive capabilities (e.g suppression of enemy's air defense - SEAD), which can limit NATO's ability to regain control over lost territory. To strengthen deterrence, such scenarios can be practiced by groups of the most determined and capable countries. Nevertheless, it is possible that NATO will decide to include scenarios of such escalation in future exercises. If a threat from Russia further increases (for example with the deployment of offensive capabilities to Belarus), NATO can also decide to deploy conventional land-based, long-range precision strike capability on the eastern flank to demonstrate that it is ready for conventional escalation and will not be intimidated. Such capability could be perceived as a proportional response to a threat from Russia's ground launched nuclear capable cruise missiles, which led to the demise of Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.[22]

The eastern NATO members have most to lose if Russia was able to intimidate the Alliance and limit or delay its response to military aggression. This is why Poland, the biggest NATO member on the eastern flank, has been developing its national capability to defend itself (proportionately to its potential), support other allies and receive NATO reinforcements[23]. At the same time, it looks for additional options, which may require a quick formation of the coalition of the most determined states, especially with the US and the UK.

Conclusions

Strengthened conventional and nuclear deterrence is unlikely to deter Russia from the attempts to exploit political vulnerabilities in member states and in the Alliance as a whole. Russia's strategic goals will not change as long as the regime defines them in the opposition to the West and NATO is perceived as an obstacle for their achievement. Hybrid conflict under the threshold of open warfare will be perceived by Russia as a cost effective instrument of influencing policies of NATO members to complicate the decisions of the Alliance. Even if NATO members become less vulnerable to such malign influence, social and political vulnerabilities will remain, which can be exploited to deepen political polarization in democratic states. Russia will attempt to narrow the scope for political consensus in NATO states necessary to agree and implement strategic decisions, which extend beyond one or two election cycles. Efforts may focus on two main exerting influence through propaganda and disinformation campaigns, which can be especially effective. Russia can exploit NATO's strategy based on reinforcements to undermine the confidence of NATO members on the eastern flank that they will receive support during the crisis. Russia can also exploit similar fears across Europe that the US will not offer meaningful support to European allies during crisis, which can escalate into a large-scale war. To limit the negative effects of such narratives, NATO members and the US will have to actively use their new force posture, exercises and strategic communication to demonstrate their commitment for collective defense.

Russia will attempt to narrow the scope for political consensus in NATO states necessary to agree and implement strategic decisions, which extend beyond one or two election cycles.

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22   See for example: A. Kacprzyk, Ł. Kulesa, M.A. Piotrowski, NATO Deterrence and Arms Control Policy in a World without the INF Treaty, PISM Policy Paper, No 2, (177), March 2020.

23   See for example: Russia's Strategy, Goals, Means and Ways – A View from Poland, BASIC, 21 November 2021.

NATO's military deterrence will be based on having a credible strategy, creative doctrine and capability to defend NATO's territory and respond to conventional escalation, which can be accompanied by the increased risk of the employment of nuclear weapons by Russia. The decisions already agreed by NATO strengthen the deterrence by denial and punishment but the credibility of deterrence will be a continuous, dynamic process. It will require not only the implementation of Readiness Initiative by 2024 but also long term modernization of military potential to maintain a military and technological edge over Russia. NATO will have to constantly adjust its force posture and signaling to a changing threat from Russia. US will maintain pressure on European allies that they should meet agreed commitments, something most of them were reluctant or unable to do in the past. Despite the risks associated with being focused on Indo- Pacific, the US will maintain military capabilities in Europe to reassure allies, provide leadership during the crisis, and respond to increasing threats from Russia. It will also develop mechanisms (doctrine, command and force structure, exercises) to be able to support collective defense operations even if a large part of US potential is engaged in the Indo-Pacific. It is clear for strategic communities on the both sides of the Atlantic that, without such mechanism, NATO would not survive as a credible collective defense alliance and the US would lose its influence in the policies of 29 Allies, who can offer significant support for US strategic goals beyond Europe.

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