What deters Russia

Enduring principles for responding to Moscow

Keir Giles

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Summary

— For the past 30 years, NATO, the EU and the West in general have consistently struggled to find means of dissuading Russia from taking actions that they find undesirable or unacceptable. The absence of major multinational conflict in Europe argues a success of deterrence, primarily by NATO; but the prevalence of overt or covert hostile actions by Russia, whether military or in other domains, there and across the globe shows that this success is only partial.

— The question of how to deter Russia from future actions that threaten other states, their governments, economies or people recurs repeatedly in policy discussions. A core challenge to finding an answer lies in Russia's consistently acting beyond the boundaries of what its Western counterparts consider to be normal and rational state behaviour.

— Two further asymmetries exacerbate this challenge: the differing assessments by Russia and many Western countries of both the current and the desired state of relations between them; and a gulf in attitudes to using hostile measures, whether military or non-military, to achieve state or leadership objectives. Moscow, perceiving itself already to be in a state of conflict with the West, is not subject to the self-imposed constraints of its targets, which believe they are still in a state of peace with Russia. Similarly, Russia has repeatedly achieved its objectives by exploiting the fact that Western states have prioritized ending conflict over achieving a satisfactory outcome in it.

— The precise methods by which Russia might successfully be dissuaded or deterred are as varied as the situations in which they would have to be applied. But a number of key principles for successful deterrence can be deduced from consistent Russian state behaviours and attitudes, which remain relatively constant determinants throughout all these situations. Lessons can also be drawn from past examples where these behaviours and attitudes have been understood and leveraged to achieve a successful outcome – or ignored, resulting in failure.

— This paper considers all of these factors to offer a range of recommendations for appropriate action and messaging to influence Russia away from destructive activities.

01
Introduction, context and scope

The underlying issues that drive Russia to hostile and destructive state behaviour cannot be changed. What can be changed are the ways Russia's counterparts encourage or dissuade that behaviour.

Syrian stand-off, 2017

During June 2017 coalition forces were stationed at Al-Tanf base in southern Syria as part of the ongoing Operation Inherent Resolve.[1] The strategic and political situation was heated, owing to a recent sarin attack by the Syrian Army to which the coalition forces had responded with air and missile strikes. On 29 May and 8 June US forces struck against the Syrian Army and by 18 June coalition forces had shot down a Syrian Su-22 aircraft and an Iranian drone. Russian troops stationed in Syria responded with an air strike against US-supported rebel groups and by 19 June Russia threatened to suspend the hotline between the coalition forces and the Russian headquarters.[2]

During this tense situation, the commander of Operation Inherent Resolve, Lieutenant General Stephen J. Townsend, received a letter addressed to him personally from the recently appointed new commander of the Russian forces in Syria, Colonel-General Vladimir Zarudnitsky.[3] The letter demanded that coalition forces withdraw from southern Syria within two hours, otherwise they would be subjected to air strikes by Russian forces.

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1 The sequence of events described in this introduction is as relayed by a senior military officer speaking at an event held under the Chatham House Rule in late 2018.
2 Ryan, H. (2017), 'Timeline of Escalation in Syria: U.S. vs. Iran, Russia, Syria and "Pro-Regime" Forces post January 20, 2017', *Just Security*, 22 June 2017, https://www.justsecurity.org/42413/timeline-escalation-syria-u-s-vs-iran-russia-syria-pro-regime-forces-post-january-20-2017 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
3 Victory Krm (@KrmVictory) (2017), 'A discreet change of the commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Syria', *Inform Napalm*, 7 November 2017, https://informnapalm.org/en/discreet-change-commander-russian-armed-forces-syria (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

US Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Joseph Votel agreed that Townsend could address the demand as he saw fit at a local level, dealing directly with Zarudnitsky. Meanwhile, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford immediately contacted his Russian counterpart, General Valery Gerasimov.

With 10 minutes remaining to the notional deadline for the initiation of Russian air strikes, Townsend established direct communication with Zarudnitsky. However, instead of discussing the ultimatum, Zarudnitsky launched a non-stop tirade of complaint about US behaviour. At two minutes to the deadline, Townsend ordered the interpreter to interrupt him and tell him to shut up; and at his first opportunity to speak, he asked: 'Are we talking or fighting?' After a substantial pause, Zarudnitsky replied: 'We are talking.' Townsend wrote a note to the room: 'My Russian friend just blinked.'

Coalition forces remained in place in southern Syria and continued to carry out their mission. The following month, in a media briefing, Townsend said that channels for direct communication with Russian forces 'have been quietly working, despite some tensions'.[4]

This vignette illustrates three critically important features of successful engagement with Russia:

— The ability and will to face down Russian bluff and bluster;

— Demonstrated willingness to maintain escalation dominance;

— Open and available channels of communication, and their use to deliver clear and direct messages.

Each of these features will be explored in detail in this paper, using both historical and recent case studies to illustrate their relevance to deterrence of Russia today.

Context

Recognition of the reality of confrontation with Moscow in early 2014 swiftly gave rise to intense debate on the best way to prevent further Russian military adventurism in Europe, and subsequently on how to counter assertive Russian action further afield. A vast range of views has been represented over this period, from calls for a return to intense militarization at the boundaries of Russian influence reminiscent of the Cold War-era inner German border, to a policy of conciliation towards Russia which some have compared to 1930s-style appeasement of Nazi Germany.

In the middle of this spectrum, the US and its NATO allies and partners have been taking active but cautious steps. In many cases these steps have been constrained by budget, manpower and political considerations; but overall they also follow a careful weighing of the need for effective defence of European allies against the

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4 US Department of Defense (2017), 'Remarks by General Townsend in a media availability in Baghdad, Iraq', https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1244058/remarks-by-general-townsend-in-a-media-availability-in-baghdad-iraq (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

danger of presenting a force posture that Russia genuinely interprets as threatening, and thereby precipitating precisely the kind of incident the US and its European allies seek to avoid. This paper aims to inform the continued maintenance of this balance, by drawing conclusions from current and historical Russian security concerns and behaviours to propose an effective, but not provocative, comprehensive approach to deterring Russia in regions not limited to Europe and domains not limited to conventional military threat.

More than a decade of ambitious military modernization, reform and rearmament has transformed the Russian Armed Forces beyond recognition.

Moscow has identified the US and NATO, which it sees as an extension of US power, as a threat to its security. Continuing tensions are founded on its stated conviction that Western intentions are hostile. According to President Vladimir Putin, speaking in 2015: 'Recent events show that we cannot hope that some of our geopolitical opponents will change their hostile course any time in the foreseeable future … we must respond accordingly to this situation.'[5] Whether this conviction is genuine or a pretext, it forms the inescapable framework for Russian decision-making and action. It has caused an expansion of the terms of confrontation with Russia, from being predominantly a political disagreement over the international order and the shared neighbourhood between the West and Russia, to a live confrontation with direct attacks on Western countries in every domain except overt military conflict. Meanwhile, in a political environment where Russia is exhibiting progressively less restraint overall in its foreign and domestic policy, it is the shared neighbourhood – allies and partners of the US which are also front-line states bordering Russia – that is still considered under greatest threat of further Russian military assertiveness.

Russia does not present solely a military threat, but military power plays a core role in its great-power ambitions. More than a decade of ambitious military modernization, reform and rearmament has transformed the Russian Armed Forces beyond recognition. The process continues, aided by a wide-reaching initiative within the Russian forces of acting on lessons learnt from the interventions in Ukraine and Syria.

This should be a NATO problem. But NATO member states were slow to initiate recovery from the military atrophy caused by a focus on unconventional threats out of area and an assumption that tolerable relations with Russia would continue, in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Although Russia commenced its military regeneration and transformation in earnest in 2009, NATO members – with a few exceptions – continued their process of demobilization by shrinking defence budgets, reducing the size of their armed forces and shaping their

5 Official website of the President of Russia (2015), 'Security Council meeting, July 3, 2015, The Kremlin, Moscow', http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49862 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

remaining forces for contingency, not collective self-defence. Efforts by the US to induce European NATO members to take an interest in their own defence, and fund it appropriately, have consistently met with only modest success,[6] and most NATO members have not succeeded in addressing the profound political and military adaptation necessary to meet the Russia challenge. By contrast, even during the challenging period of the Donald Trump administration, the US continued to demonstrate its commitment to European defence. The US European Reassurance Initiative (renamed European Deterrence Initiative in 2017) aimed to 'position more of the U.S. Army's best and most modern equipment in the area', while also undertaking substantial rotations of major US Army units.[7]

But plans and activities such as these have encountered substantial and influential resistance. Eminent figures such as Henry Kissinger have argued that the West is as responsible as Russia for the Ukraine crisis.[8] The former foreign minister and current president of key NATO ally Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, has referred to NATO defensive preparations as 'sabre-rattling' and 'war-mongering'.[9] Arguments for concessions and appeasement to manage the Russian challenge persist, despite an overwhelming weight of historical and current evidence that this approach is counter-productive. When views like this successfully influence European or North American policy, they constitute a substantial obstacle to long-term implementation of effective deterrence. In this context, Moscow's ongoing hostile actions are the most effective reminders that Russia and its behaviours present a proximate and immediate strategic threat, against which countermeasures are essential.[10]

This paper will argue that although the fundamental pillars of Russian foreign policy cannot be changed, it is possible to influence where and how actions to implement that policy may be taken, by setting and enforcing limits and boundaries to Russian behaviour. The immediate answers are simple. Western allies have a pressing need:

— In the short term, to establish, maintain and clearly communicate a balanced and credible deterrent posture, blending both conventional military and nuclear capabilities and – vitally – the capability and will to withstand and respond to non-military attacks;

— Over the long term, to display strategic patience.

6 Larsen, J. (2016), *Time to Face Reality: Priorities for NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit*, Rome: NATO Defense College, https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=891 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
7 Lubold, G. and Barnes, J. (2016), 'Pentagon Readies More Robust U.S. Military Presence in Eastern Europe', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-readies-more-robust-u-s-military-presence-in-eastern-europe-1459324801 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
8 Von Mittelstaedt, J. and Follath, E. (2016), 'Do We Achieve World Order through Chaos or Insight?', interview with Henry Kissinger, *Spiegel Online International*, 30 March 2016, https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-on-state-of-global-politics-a-1002073.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
9 Reuters (2016), 'German minister warns NATO of 'sabre-rattling' against Russia', 18 June 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/nato-russia-germany/german-minister-warns-nato-of-sabre-rattling-against-russia-idINKCN0Z40MB (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
10 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2021), 'Foreign Secretary: Russia must face cost for malign activity', 24 March 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-russia-must-face-cost-for-malign-activity (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Maintaining channels for dialogue is also critical (although, as always, what is actually said is even more crucial). This is essential for de-escalating current tensions and achieving greater predictability in the relationship, even if it will not succeed in resolving the root causes of the confrontation. The response to the Russian threat must be measured and acknowledge the risk of miscalculation. Sustained, tangible defensive measures are required, but they must have a rationale that can be clearly and directly communicated in order to minimize the risks of misreading of intent. It follows that channels for clear communication are essential to deterrence: passing the message that the West is willing and prepared to defend itself is a key element of maintaining stability.

But in addition, this communication must also take place internally, within domestic policy environments. At the senior level advisers must effectively articulate to decision-makers the challenges that Russia poses. The understanding still needs to be promoted that with Russia's political doctrine profoundly at odds with the interests of Western democracies, the current disagreement is not about Crimea, Ukraine or Syria; it is about a fundamental incompatibility of world views, and the dangerous implications of this clash for governments, societies and people.[11]

The scope of deterrence

Throughout the ongoing crisis in relations with Moscow, countless policy seminars in the West have addressed the question to the Russia expert(s) in the room: 'How can we deter Russia?' Often the only possible initial response has been: 'From doing what?'

The confrontation with Russia stems from a clash of world views, including on the nature of security in Europe and the shared neighbourhood between the West and Russia, and – by extension – over the power and influence of the respective parties in the rest of the world. There is a basic incompatibility between how Russia and the West view sovereignty, international relations, and even history. Furthermore Russia sees itself as a 'great power' – and one that is under threat – in ways that are incomprehensible to other countries. These underlying factors cannot be changed, and they cause Russian behaviours to be based on a fundamental need to challenge and confront the West. It follows that Russia's hostile intent, and the associated willingness to take action against the West where the cost-benefit calculus appears positive, cannot be deterred, because it derives from an elemental understanding of how the world works and what is necessary to survive in it.

However, Russia can be dissuaded from taking specific actions that the Euro-Atlantic community finds undesirable or unacceptable. It follows that an essential precondition for attempting deterrence is to understand and define interests that are to be defended, and by extension what Russian action against them is tolerable and what is not; only then can the establishment

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11 Giles, K. (2021), 'Russia and the West want the same thing', in *Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia*, Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

and communication of deterrent measures be coherent and consistently applied. At the same time, successful deterrence must be anchored in as clear an understanding as possible of Russia's actual motivations and objectives. Attempts to dissuade Russia from doing something cannot be divorced from consideration of why Russia might wish to do that thing in the first place, and what actions might remove the currently perceived incentive for it to do so.

In conflict, Russia is likely to leverage three key advantages: having greater interests at stake; being present first; and being able to set the pace through a greater willingness to escalate.

Ordinarily the first task to be considered has been deterring Russia from further military adventurism in Europe, primarily against NATO member states. In any such conflict, Russia is likely to leverage three key advantages: having greater interests at stake; being present first; and being able to set the pace through a greater willingness to escalate. The core requirement for deterring Russia from such military action is expensive, but simply described. Its two key elements are, first, effective military power: capabilities that cause Russia concern through the likelihood that in full-scale war it would suffer both defeat and significant damage; and, second, credibility: ensuring Russia believes that the West in general and the US in particular would have the political will to employ these capabilities when required to defend or retaliate against Russian aggression.

The first of these elements continues to cause concern in Europe as a result of a quarter-century of military drawdown by European NATO allies, accompanied by the reduction of US forces to a historically low level on the continent owing to the focus on adversaries other than Russia.[12] The requirements of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) for credible deterrence were described in 2015 as 'eye-wateringly large, and not available in NATO at present'.[13] Six years later, despite substantially greater US investment in deterrence in Europe and marginal improvements in defence spending by some European allies, the aftermath of long atrophy and neglect is still the defining feature of military readiness in most of Europe.

In considering the outcome of any potential clash, Russia will assess 'not just local correlation of forces and means, but more broadly state power – what a country is able to bring to bear over the course of conflict'.[14] This means that for the prospect of exercising deterrence by punishment, it is overall force levels that are significant – in particular those forces capable of delivering long-distance strikes, and not just

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12 Cox, M. (2017), 'EUCOM Commander Calls for Larger Force to Deter Russia', Military.com, 28 March 2017, http://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/03/28/eucom-commander-calls-for-larger-force-to-deter-russia.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021); Grady, J. (2017), 'Scaparotti: Russia Pushing U.S. European Command Back to a Warfighting Focus', USNI News, 28 March 2017, https://news.usni.org/2017/03/28/scaparotti-russia-pushing-u-s-european-command-back-warfighting-focus (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
13 A senior delegate presenting under the Chatham House Rule at the Annual Baltic Conference on Defence, Tallinn, 2015.
14 Reach, C. (2020), 'Review of Strategic Deterrence book: The work of Burenok and Pechatnov (2011)', Russia Strategic Initiative, HQ, USEUCOM, Stuttgart, 3 December 2020.

those already present in the immediate area of confrontation.[15] But relying on forces in other theatres to retaliate against Russia in open conflict raises the importance of the second key element of military deterrence: removing doubt that, when needed, Western governments, and the US in particular, will act. Changing world perceptions of the US under the Trump administration were welcomed by Russia because they achieved one of its key objectives of weakening US credibility and alliances without it having to do much at all. Conversely, an increased tempo of exercises in Europe is pointed to as evidence of strong US commitment to the continent's defence.[16] But exercises, while reassuring to host-nation populations, do not in themselves constitute a deterrent measure: while they may demonstrate capability, they say little of the will to use it. In the continued absence of demonstrable willingness by major European NATO allies to invest meaningfully in their own defence, any undermining of the belief that the US could and would take swift action to safeguard their security threatens a key bulwark against Russian assertive behaviour. Firm and unequivocal messaging from the US administration of President Joe Biden would therefore make a fundamental contribution to deterrence overall.[17]

Changing world perceptions of the United States under the administration of President Donald Trump were welcomed by Russia because they achieved one of its key objectives of weakening US credibility and alliances without it having to do much at all.

For as long as Russia is dissuaded from attacking NATO territory, NATO's primary deterrent mission can be said to have been met. The idea persists, largely unsupported by evidence, that 'Putin might use an external military adventure in Europe or elsewhere to distract from his domestic failures and from Russia's failing economy in order to try to shore up his power base'.[18] But the suggestion that in an otherwise stable security situation Russia might be tempted to launch a *fait accompli* operation against a front-line NATO state, accompanied by theatre-level nuclear blackmail or escalation scenarios, has begun to pass from vogue, especially when divorced from strategic context.[19]

15 Anderson, Lt-Col. R. R. et al. (2016), *Strategic Landpower and a Resurgent Russia: An Operational Approach to Deterrence*, Carlisle: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/2016/pubs/strategic-landpower-and-a-resurgent-russia-an-operational-approach-to-deterrence-a-u-s-army-war-college-integrated-research-project-in-support-of-u-s-european-command-and-u-s-army-europe (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
16 Grady, J. (2021), 'NATO's Steadfast Defender Exercise Highlights Allied Deterrence as Russian Aggression Grows', USNI News, 21 May 2021, https://news.usni.org/2021/05/21/natos-steadfast-defender-exercise-highlights-allied-deterrence-as-russian-aggression-grows.
17 Alper, A. and Holland, S. (2021), 'Biden tells Putin: U.S. no longer 'rolling over'', Reuters, 4 February 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-biden-idUSKBN2A42QZ (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
18 Pavel, B. (2020), 'The Coronavirus Is Raising the Likelihood of Great-Power Conflict', *Defense One*, 1 June 2020, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/06/coronavirus-raising-likelihood-great-power-conflict/165798 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
19 Adamsky, D. (2021), *Moscow's Aerospace Theory of Victory: Western Assumptions and Russian Reality*, Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2021-U-029278-Final.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021); Kofman, M. (2020), 'Getting The Fait Accompli Problem Right In U.S. Strategy', War on the Rocks, 3 November 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/getting-the-fait-accompli-problem-right-in-u-s-strategy (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

However, this has done little to deter Russian campaigns in other domains than open military clashes, and the continuing possibility of low-intensity hybrid scenarios and asymmetrical and formally unannounced conflicts.[20] Russia has persisted in hostile actions across Europe as a whole, both in high-profile incidents such as murders and attempted murders of enemies and critics of the Russian state, and in a steady drumbeat of less prominent operations, including the ever-present background noise of persistent cyber, information, subversion and 'active measures' (see Chapter 3, Section 7). It follows that a broader approach to deterrence is required, following principles that apply to both military and non-military domains.

The scope of this study

This study therefore seeks to extract common themes from past examples where Moscow has been successfully dissuaded from a particular course of action – or where an attempt to do so has failed. It looks for general principles that can inform how best overall to deter a mindset in which Russia would be inclined, encouraged or tempted to take aggressive action. As such it will largely leave aside discussion of two specific domains, nuclear and cyber, where deterrence does not conform to broader principles. Each of these at present follows rules of its own, but for opposite reasons. Nuclear deterrence occupies its own conceptual space because it has developed highly intricate and formalized rules and understandings, incentivized by the commonly accepted danger of error or miscalculation. In cyberspace, by contrast, the very absence of those same shared concepts and understandings while commonly accepted precepts and rules are still being formulated means that activities have an equally loose relationship with the principles of deterrence in more traditional fields.

How Russia itself seeks to deter others is currently the subject of intense and authoritative research tracking evolving principles in Russia's view of deterrence, compellence and intimidation, and the interplay between these approaches and more.[21] But perhaps counter-intuitively, this conceptual development within Russia, governing how it seeks to project its own messages of deterrence, may have only a limited bearing on how Moscow itself can and should be deterred. This is because the motives and stimuli that drive an adversary's action or inaction may not be defined by the adversary's own theoretical constructs of deterrence. This works both ways: each deterring actor may leverage aspects of the opponent's psyche that are not at the forefront of the latter's conscious military or political calculations. For example, other than within a close-knit community of Western experts, recent Russian conceptualization of deterrence theory may still at this point be only dimly perceived outside Russia – that is, by the objects of Russian deterrence activity. This means that the methods by which Russia may seek to exercise deterrence may be effective, or not, without being clearly and directly perceived by Russia's adversaries

20 Veebel, V. and Ploom, I. (2019), 'Are the Baltic States and NATO on the right path in deterring Russia in the Baltic?', *Defense & Security Analysis*, 35 (4), 23 October 2019, https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2019.1675947 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
21 For example, Adamsky, D. (2021), *Deterrence à la Ruse: Genealogy, Uniqueness and Their Sources*, Russia Strategic Initiative, USEUCOM, https://community.apan.org/wg/rsi/project-connect/m/documents/367016 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

as part of a deterrence conversation – a theme explored in more detail below in 'Readiness to escalate' (Chapter 3, Section 6). In the same way, Western actions can deter Russia without necessarily conforming to how Russia itself currently believes deterrence works.

This study therefore looks for lessons that are not tied to any specific scenario, theory or doctrine but reflect simpler and more profound fundamental principles of what motivates the behaviours of the Russian state. To do so, it proposes a number of enduring principles that appear common to successful instances of deterring Russia, supported by illustrative case studies. As such, it considers Russian behaviour on the basis not of doctrine or theory, still less international relations theory, but of empirical observations. That process begins by examining the framework and context for these case studies – a defining collection of features of Russia that scholar of Russian strategic culture Dima Adamsky refers to as 'Historical-Ideational-Cultural Sources of Uniqueness'.[22]

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22 Ibid.

02
Attitudes and behaviours

The world changes rapidly, but Russia's ways of coping with it have remained strikingly consistent over extended periods. This consistency offers a baseline for enduring principles for coping with Russia.

Enduring Russian attitudes

Means of exercising deterrence are as many, as varied and as complex as the different domains in which it can be exercised. One factor, however, remains relatively constant: the doctrine, preconceptions and conceptual underpinnings of the party to be deterred. In the case of Russia, this introduces a layer of relative predictability, since the behaviours of Russia's military and state leadership in response to external stimuli have remained remarkably consistent throughout social, political and technological upheaval, not only during the Soviet and post-Soviet period but back through centuries of Russian history.[23] Historical parallels can be overstated, but past performance can nevertheless be a guide to future results. As noted by RUSI's Jack Watling, 'Deterrence is about cognitive effects. Governments are not very revealing as to how they assess threats, and their public statements can be highly misleading. However, analysing statements over time, and tracking how they correspond with actions, does provide a baseline against which to assess threat perception.'[24] In the case of Russian security thinking, the responses displayed throughout the past are so strikingly uniform that they present a weighty argument for considering that they are likely to be emulated today.

23 Giles, K. (2019), *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press/London: Chatham House.
24 Watling, J. (2020), *By Parity and Presence: Deterring Russia with Conventional Land Forces*, RUSI Occasional Paper, London: RUSI, https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/by-parity-and-presence-deterring-russia-with-conventional-land-forces (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

This chapter therefore introduces a number of guiding principles of Russian state thought and action which appear persistent and dependable, and which therefore provide a basis for calibrating actions and messages intended to deter.

Expansionism

Russia has a consistent history of seeking stability and security through expanding the geographical area under its occupation or control, based at least in part on a drive to reduce potential threats by pushing them further away. This desire for a *cordon sanitaire* under Russian control remains strong, and was an important contributing factor to Russia's decision to seize Crimea and undertake a military campaign in eastern Ukraine in order to avert the perceived danger of Ukraine escaping the Russian sphere of dominance – a move Russia later capitalized on by transforming Crimea into a militarized outpost protecting its Black Sea approaches in a mirror image to the role of Kaliningrad on the Baltic. But in the present decade, Russian control need not be achieved by the traditional means of military occupation. It remains the case that in order to stop losing ground, Russia sees the utility of seizing small slices of territory in order to create frozen conflicts and political impasses (a process known as piece-keeping, in the sense of keeping small pieces of other people's countries). But its intensive focus on asymmetric measures, and in particular the utility of information warfare for exerting control without the need for overt military intervention, means that the threat from Russian expansionism is far more diverse and nuanced than when it could be detected through the simple fact of Russian tanks crossing a border.[25]

The fact that one of the motivations for this expansionist urge is to reduce threats to Russia itself presents a further challenge, in the form of arguments that Russia's actions must consequently be forgiven, excused and tolerated and – above all – that its aspiration to a sphere of unchallenged dominion in Europe is entirely defensive in nature. However, the drive to expand control at the expense of neighbouring states has persisted even in the absence of any perceptible threat to Russia. An assessment in 1955 concluded that the seizure of control over Eastern Europe following the Second World War was driven by persistent attitudes, not immediate stimuli: 'The Soviet regime merely accentuated certain basic Russian cultural themes, and the Russians would have been expansionists in the post World War II period even if there had been no Soviet regime.'[26] A similar conclusion was reached at the end of the Cold War: 'As Russians today [1994] rediscover their tsarist past, they come face-to-face with an older and deeper national tradition of imperial rule over their neighbours.'[27]

There is a perpetual debate over whether the background noise of hostile actions by Russia in a wide range of domains – in cyberspace, in disinformation, in military interventions in third countries – is caused by a belief that it is defending itself against an actual and genuine threat from the West, or is simply an expression

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25 Giles, K. (2016), *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare*, Rome: NATO Defense College, https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=995 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
26 Reshetar, J. (1955), *Problems of Analyzing and Predicting Soviet Behavior*, New York: Doubleday, p. 20.
27 Starr, S. F. (ed.) (1994), *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., p. 6.

of its nature as an unreconstructed expansionist power. But the net result is the same. In order to achieve its aspirations of expanded control, Russia needs to check and roll back, not cooperate with, the US and its influence worldwide. This is an inherently destructive impulse and one that it is essential to constrain.

Willingness to withdraw

However, another consistent pattern in Russian expansionist behaviour is readiness to stop or indeed pull back when significant resistance is encountered. A saying commonly attributed to Vladimir Lenin held that in order to expand its influence, Moscow should 'probe with a bayonet; when you encounter mush, push on; if you find steel, pull back'.[28] Russia's adversaries have at times perceived this approach clearly: in the mid-19th century British prime minister Lord Palmerston noted: 'The policy and practice of the Russian government has always been to push forwards its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy and want of firmness of other governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and retire when it met with decided resistance.'[29] Certainly Russia and its leaders and military commanders have consistently acted as though guided by this principle. A year later a French political commentator observed that 'it matters little to Russia to be right or wrong, or to draw back if required',[30] and this principle held good throughout the Soviet period in the next century, consistent with a 'general rule that the Russians are cautious to a degree, are quite good at sensing danger, and, when they do miscalculate in the grand manner, think nothing of going into reverse and cutting their losses'.[31] George Kennan observed that showdowns with Moscow could be avoided through sufficient demonstrations of strength and resolve: 'Impervious to logic of reason [Russia] is highly sensitive to logic of force. For this reason it can easily withdraw – and usually does when strong resistance is encountered at any point. Thus, if the adversary has sufficient force and makes clear his readiness to use it, he rarely has to do so.'[32] The example of the 2017 Syrian standoff described in Chapter 1 suggests that demonstrations of resolve and willingness to stand firm in the face of Russian demands, assertions or threats continue to be the best means of avoiding conflict; and anecdotal evidence from US and other service personnel encountering their Russian counterparts in similar situations suggests that this principle consistently holds good.

At the same time it should not be assumed that Moscow's ambitions are limited to the immediate cause or focus of conflict, whether geographically or politically. Open invitations to seize control or ground will be taken, as in the armed conflict with Georgia in 2008, when the leading elements of Russian troops continued

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28 Despite extensive research spanning several years, the author has never been able to find any primary source indicating that Lenin did in fact say or write this.

29 Letter from Lord Palmerston to the Earl of Clarendon, Foreign Secretary, July 1853.

30 Montégut, E. (1854), 'De l'idée de monarchie universelle', *Revue Des Deux Mondes (1829–1971)*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1854, pp. 194–210, p. 205, www.jstor.org/stable/44690550 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

31 Crankshaw, E. (1984), *Putting up with the Russians: Commentary and Criticism, 1947–84*, London: Macmillan, p. 207.

32 Telegram, George Kennan to James Byrnes ('Long Telegram'), 22 February 1946, available at https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116178.pdf.

their advance towards Tbilisi after the effective end of the fighting simply because nobody had told them to stop. If Russia achieves its objectives and is still unchecked, previous patterns of behaviour suggest that it will continue, in order to marshal additional means for leverage at the negotiating table. Following another principle that holds good throughout both recent and more distant history, Russia has shown itself content to take two steps forward and one step back in order to advance its position. There is a consistent pattern, whether in territorial control or in any other aspect of international relations: Moscow routinely wins by demanding the whole of somebody else's cake and then ingraciously settling for only half.

Respect for strength

According to former Estonian defence minister Sven Mikser: 'For Putin, weakness is more provocative than strength.'[33] President Putin has indeed expressed this view clearly, justifying his country's far-reaching and enormously expensive military transformation and rearmament with the concern that Russia 'must not tempt anyone by our weakness'.[34] In this mindset, both deficiencies in conventional military power and a visible deficit in will to resist present a temptation and an invitation. Weakness provokes, but readiness deters.

Russia will continue to employ threats, bluster and attempts at intimidation in order to seek advantage. Its confrontational approaches, even when considered entirely inappropriate to the situation by the other side, serve a clear purpose.

It has been found throughout the history of relations with Russia that there is only one effective deterrent to its military adventurism: the possession of significant military force, present in evident mass where it is needed, coupled with demonstrated willingness to use it. In 1953 Chatham House published a retrospective of recent history analysing the root causes of the loss of Eastern Europe to Soviet domination. One of its key conclusions, when reviewing what was effective in dealing with Moscow, was that any initiative by the Western Allies that was 'not backed by significant military force merely irritated the Russians without impressing them'.[35] Precisely the same assessment had been made by Karl Marx exactly a century before: for countries seeking to reach an understanding with Russia, 'to show that they were ready to back up their intention with the last reason of kings – fleets and armies – was the sure means of maintaining peace.

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33 Speaking at Lennart Meri Conference, Tallinn, 2015.
34 Official site of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation (2012), 'Article by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Rossiiskaya Gazeta: 'We should not tempt anyone by allowing ourselves to be weak'', 20 February 2012, http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/18185/print (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
35 McNeill, W. H. (1953), *America, Britain and Russia: Their Co-operation and Conflict 1941–1946*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 723.

There is only one way to deal with a Power like Russia, and that is the fearless way.'[36] Even further back in history, it was consistently the case that 'when neighbours are in a position to mount military counterforce, as was Sweden or China or the Ottoman Empire, [Russian] expansion stops …. Muscovites typically behaved as pragmatic opportunists; they were characteristically risk-averse and quite willing to give up any objective when resisted or when the goal became too costly.'[37]

Russia will continue to employ threats, bluster and attempts at intimidation in order to seek advantage. Its confrontational approaches, even when considered entirely inappropriate to the situation by the other side, serve a clear purpose. According to experienced US academic Kimberly Marten, 'Russian diplomats sometimes use angry tirades and insults as negotiating tactics …. Being confrontational [is] a way to test a partner and look for psychological weaknesses or cracks in the opposing team's unity that could be exploited.'[38] In almost all circumstances the appropriate response to this approach is to not back down; otherwise, Russia will continue to follow its 'historical expansive drift along the line of least resistance, which it is easy, if troublesome, to stop by firmness.'[39] This firmness is required to call the bluff – with the caveat that it must necessarily be backed by the demonstrated capability and readiness to respond to further pressure.

Acceptance of conflict

The perception that the aim of Western policy is to destabilize Russia and overturn its system of governance has probably become unchallengeable within Russian decision-making circles. This is one symptom of a world view that sees state-on-state conflict as normal and inevitable, in striking contrast to the Western assumption that peace is supposed to be the normal state of affairs. Russia's perception of the West as an adversary is in no way dependent on how the US or its partners perceive the relationship.[40] In 2007, when with the exception of expert Russia-watchers and the front-line states the West was convinced that relations with Russia were comfortable, the then chief of the General Staff, Yuriy Baluyevsky, noted that 'Russia's transition to interaction with the West on the basis of forming common or close strategic interests has not strengthened the military security of our state. Russia should observe the immutable axiom that wars and armed conflicts will continue uninterrupted, because they are generated by the

36 Marx, K.; Marx Aveling, E. and Aveling, R. (eds) (1897), *The Eastern Question: A reprint of letters written 1853–1856 dealing with the events of the Crimean War*, London: Frank Cass (reprint, originally published in 1897).
37 Keenan, E. L. (1994), 'On Certain Mythical Beliefs and Russian Behaviors', in Starr, *The Legacy of History*, p. 30.
38 Marten, K. (2017), 'President Trump, Keep in Mind That Russia and the West Think about Negotiations Very, Very Differently', *Washington Post*, 25 July 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/25/president-trump-keep-in-mind-that-russia-and-the-west-think-about-negotiations-very-very-differently (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
39 Crankshaw, *Putting up with the Russians*, p. 5.
40 Blank, S. (2016), 'Russia's War on the West Is Real. Why Aren't We Fighting Back?', Atlantic Council, 20 December 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-s-war-on-the-west-is-real-why-aren-t-we-fighting-back (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

continuing rivalry between states.'[41] Today, according to Daniel Gouré, 'one cannot understand how the Russian leadership thinks about strategic issues without appreciating the fact that the Kremlin sees itself as being at war with the West.'[42]

This distinction between attitudes to conflict gives rise to the current situation in which Russia is willing to carry out a wide range of offensive actions against adversary states, including economic and cyber actions, subversion and targeted assassinations, while the states subjected to these attacks are only on the defensive. This differing perception can only further exacerbate the related asymmetry of will to resort to armed force. Russia will have far fewer constraints on entering open conflict than its Western adversaries. This is in part aided by a perception within Russia, assiduously promoted by state media, that the conflict has already begun.[43] The absence of a shared presumption, often mistakenly assumed by Russia's interlocutors, that conflict is undesirable and should be avoided almost at all costs also has direct implications for effective deterrence. Put simply, where the desire to avoid open conflict may be a substantial motivating factor for Western liberal democracies, it plays a demonstrably different role in Russian decision-making. As a result, policies that may deter other countries risk being ineffective in the case of Russia because of entirely different assumptions about desirable outcomes and ways and means to achieve them.[44] In addition it is argued that Russia would not risk an overt military conflict with the US or NATO because the far greater aggregate power of the West – including as expressed in terms of GDP – would make the eventual outcome of any extended conflict a foregone conclusion. But Russia is fully aware that a brief conflict would not be a clash of GDPs but rather in many cases a race to establish facts on the ground – a race in which Russia would enjoy a head start.

Conclusion

There are two persistent assumptions in Western policy towards Russia to which policymakers repeatedly return, but which repeatedly founder as a result of the Russian attitudes outlined above. These are, first, to assume that Russia has an interest in cooperation with the West or in reducing tensions that could lead to conflict; and, second, to assume that there is anything the West can do to affect Moscow's deeply held conviction that the West harbours hostile intent towards

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41 Kalikh, A. (2007), 'Невоенные угрозы в Военной доктрине' [Nonmilitary threats in the Military Doctrine], Независимое военное обозрение [Independent Military Review], 16 March 2007, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2007-03-16/4_doctrina.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

42 Gouré, D. (2019), 'Russian Strategic Interests', in *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, Boston: NSI, https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SMA-Russian-Strategic-Intentions-White-Paper-PDF-compressed.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

43 When Russians are removed from this media environment, they can express surprise – genuine or ironic – that the notional adversaries do not share the perception of being at war. See for instance comment by social media influencer Etkind, N. (@huetkind) (2019), 'я к тому, что только в россии ***еть какая масштабная пропаганда против пиндосов, а обычные американцы вообще даже не в курсах, что у нас война военная' [what I mean is, it's only in Russia we've got so much (expletive) propaganda against the Yanks, but normal Americans don't even know that there's a war raging between us], tweet, 2 January 2019, https://twitter.com/huetkind/status/1080589863714504706 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

44 Giles, K. (2021), *Assessing Russian Success and Failure*, in Šrāders, S. (ed.), *The Russia Conference Papers 2021*, Tartu: Baltic Defence College, https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/47519 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

it. Once these assumptions are abandoned, it is possible to construct policy that is based on a realistic assessment of what is achievable, and this includes selecting effective means of deterring Russia from hostile actions.

Overall, the development of policy must not lose sight of the basic fact that Russia and the West have fundamentally different understandings of what constitutes acceptable state behaviour.[45] Russia's approach to relations with the West today carries clear echoes of George Kennan's observation that Moscow sees security 'only in [a] patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of [the] rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it'.[46] To the extent that these guiding assumptions form the framework of Russian decision-making, they must also inform any attempts to influence that decision-making, including through deterrence.

Enduring Russian behaviours

Over the last decade Russia's assertive foreign policy agenda, its evolving capabilities and the perceived absence of severe costs and consequences for the methods it can employ against the West have combined in an increased willingness to test the boundaries of acceptable actions. This manifests itself both in undeclared attacks on Western societies and citizens (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, Section 7) and in the increased incidence of Russian brinkmanship – such as aircraft coming dangerously close to US surface vessels in the Black and Baltic Seas, provocative air manoeuvring over Syria, cross-border covert action against NATO personnel in the Baltic states and Poland, and a general assertive force posture and military exercises in the European shared neighbourhood.

Russia and its constellation of propagandists, influencers and willing or unwitting accomplices abroad have been highly successful in creating an impression of imminent danger.

A key aspect of Russia's approach is not just to probe and test adversaries, but to intimidate them. Russia wants its adversaries to believe that the risk of military or political miscalculation leading to conflict is rising, and that NATO forces operating in close proximity to Russian forces could lead to potentially catastrophic consequences arising from unplanned conflict and subsequent uncontrollable escalation. Russia and its constellation of propagandists, influencers and willing or unwitting accomplices abroad have been highly successful in creating an impression of imminent danger. The consistent message is that 'there is a very high risk of unintended war, as a result of miscalculation in cyberspace, air and

45 Liik, K. (2016), 'How to Talk with Russia', 18 December 2015, European Council on Foreign Relations, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_to_talk_to_russia5055 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
46 Kennan, 'Long Telegram'.

water. There is the risk of escalation of an unintended war to a nuclear level.'[47] This message has found a receptive audience in the West, with well-informed Western commentators concluding that 'the scale and scope of the dangerous encounters problem should be viewed … with a sense of urgency. Otherwise, the risks of a disastrous accident increase, and the escalation consequences thereof will be very difficult to contain.'[48] But as described further in Chapter 3, Section 4, in the case study of 'Close Encounters', this coordinated campaign of alarmism has distinct and tangible goals in the form of specific responses by the US and NATO. Furthermore it appears unrelated to a genuine fear of uncontrolled escalation, since the primary driver of dangerous encounters between Russian and foreign forces with a resulting risk of serious incident is precisely the irresponsible brinkmanship by Russia.

Foreign observers seeking to diagnose the underlying motivations for this stepping up of assertive activity typically choose one of two fundamental drivers for Russian behaviour:

1. Russia is a revisionist actor, motivated by neo-imperial ambitions; or

2. Russia is a defensive actor, motivated by fear and insecurity.

Either or both of these can provide explanations for Russia's recent actions. Unfortunately, because these two postures appear incompatible when measured by Western notions of state behaviour, they yield contradictory strategic prescriptions. Thus NATO allies need a robust deterrence posture to stop a revisionist Russia, but it is feared that such measures will provoke a defensive Russia. Conversely, NATO allies should try to reassure a defensive Russia, but a revisionist Russia perceives concessions, compromise and de-escalation as signals of weakness.[49] Meanwhile, in part as the result of disjointed policy on the Western side, dialogue with Russia has deteriorated and channels of communication have narrowed, further hampering accurate diagnosis or engagement with the underlying pathology.

But regardless of which of the above assumptions is accurate – or whether both are correct at the same time – repeated experience over decades shows it is a fundamental mistake to assume that Russia is interested in cooperation or reducing tension, and that the West acting on its own can improve the situation. Russian actions will continue to be driven by the persistent attitudes and assumptions described above. This means that its Western adversaries must continue to find ways of dissuading those actions by reducing their perceived benefits and increasing their likely costs. The next chapter describes specific principles that past experience has shown to be effective in this task.

47 Dmitry Suslov, speaking at Transatlantic Forum on Russia, Rome, 7 October 2019, https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/doc/2020/03/centro_studi_americani_-proceedings_transatlanticforumonrussia2019.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
48 Clem, R. S. (2021), 'Risky Encounters with Russia: Time to Talk About Real Deconfliction', War on the Rocks, 18 February 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/risky-encounters-with-russia-time-to-talk-about-real-deconfliction (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
49 Lanoszka, A. and Hunzeker, M. A. (2019), *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe*, Carlisle: US Army War College Press, Strategic Studies Institute, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/381 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

03
First principles

The history of Western relations with Moscow offers examples where efforts at deterrence have succeeded, as well as where they have failed. Considering both categories of outcome reveals recurring patterns.

When deterrence fails, the results are obvious; measuring success is far harder. Yet study of decades of interaction between Russia (and the Soviet Union before it) and Western powers uncovers a number of recurring themes and principles that appear to correlate to success or failure in attempts to deter Moscow. While some of these principles overlap and interact, in broad terms the preconditions for success can be summarized as:

— communicating clearly with Russia and honestly with Western publics;
— maintaining Western unity and resolve;
— defaulting to forward deployment in support of allies;
— firmly defending boundaries;
— allowing for miscommunication and confusion;
— avoiding self-deterrence; and
— negating sub-threshold threats by means of good governance at home.

Each of these seven principles will be considered in turn.

1. Maintain clarity and transparency

Western governments must communicate clearly and directly both with Russia and with their own populations.

Clarity of messaging

Making the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour clear to Russia requires consistency and clarity in both setting and defending them. The alternative – ambiguous policy and words not backed up by action – will inevitably lead to Russia continuing to probe and test the limits of the achievable, exploring any openings

offered by weakness or lack of clarity. In some instances there is an argument for deterrence through vagueness and uncertainty; for instance, the classic case of what constitutes an 'armed attack' for the purpose of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in a new era of cyber conflict. But to apply this principle across the board, and avoid stipulating firm red lines that will be defended under all circumstances, invites Russian experimentation, with the related danger of miscalculation or inadvertent escalation. The setting of boundaries need not necessarily specify the consequences if they are transgressed, as long as it is clear that the consequences will be palpable and meaningful to Russia either at a local level or in Moscow. The subtext to messaging can be as simple, for instance, as 'do not fly in this 25 square mile area of Syria or bad things will happen', as long as the capability to make those things happen is also apparent to Russia. Statements and declarations need to be backed by organization, plans and resources in order to be taken seriously; if they are not taken seriously, this can exacerbate already dangerous misunderstandings.

The task in fact consists of two phases: first, deciding internally what Russian behaviour is acceptable and what is not; and, second, communicating those boundaries to Russia clearly and acting to enforce them.

The first phase entails deciding what interests are to be defended; what actions or demands by Russia would be accepted and what would not be sacrificed or compromised on. But with an opponent such as Russia, whose approach to managing or avoiding conflict is largely centred on escalation dominance, confrontation should only be joined if there are real interests at stake and therefore the will to escalate will be forthcoming at the political level. In the view of Air Commodore (rtd) Carl Scott, a scholar of Russia and former UK defence attaché to Moscow, in confrontation with Russia there is a simple test of willingness to defend positions that defines whether they are core interests: 'If you are not prepared to have your troops die on the battlefield, walk away early.'[50]

The second phase is to articulate clear and consistent internal and external messaging that will follow through on the decision to defend. Russia can send out broadly coordinated information through a loosely integrated system that extends from President Putin down through the bottom-feeder echelons of online troll armies. For Western nations, by contrast, signalling is complicated by democracy – both within a single nation and in alliances. Democracies, by their very nature, may find it hard to stick to their own policies and declared boundaries, through political change and being subject to the pressure of domestic public opinion. Domestic explanation is therefore becoming an increasingly important component of deterrent posture, especially in the light of the largely absent perception of threat from Russia among Western populations. The need to explain and justify actions to domestic audiences means simplification and pegging complex events to comprehensible issues.

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50 Speaking at Chatham House seminar, August 2018.

Coherent messaging to Russia also entails a need to understand and watch what Moscow itself sees. For example, despite the fact that individual agents of US power may not be acting in a fully coordinated manner, Russia will see US policy as a whole, and will respond to actions and cues as though they were part of an integrated and coherent plan. This can lead to Russia concluding it is receiving mixed messages from the US or its allies through making spurious connections between unrelated actions and declarations. This is a particular hazard at times of domestic political discontinuity, such as the period when the declaratory policy of former president Donald Trump was entirely at odds with the policies actually enacted by the US government.[51]

Overall, it is vastly harder to deal successfully with Russia without sending firm messages, backed up by demonstrable seriousness about contingency planning.

This presents a requirement for situational awareness, across the board, of what the US and its allies – especially those Russia perceives as subordinated instruments of US power – are doing and saying to Russia, where, and why, at any given time. Decision-makers who move national assets to Russia's areas of interest – not limited to the physical space around Russia – need to communicate both among themselves and with the intelligence community and Russia experts more broadly in order to plan for and assess Russian reactions to specific cues. The task of messaging is even more complex if messages are also to be delivered in coordination with NATO, an alliance that is not coherent or united on how to deal with Russia. In this case the task is twofold: first, understanding what each NATO state is actually doing with regard to Russia, which varies widely; and, second, striving to achieve and maintain NATO alignment and a common approach in order to remove options for creating or exploiting alliance disunity. The alternative, as described by scholar of Russian strategic deterrence principles Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, is a situation where 'the only people keeping track of all of NATO's deterrent measures [are] probably the GRU'[52] – combining the worst aspects of strategic incoherence by Western allies, a failure to realize what message is being projected, and Russia divining intent on the part of the West that is simply not present.

Strategic messages can be sent through consistent tactical interaction, as with instances from Syria described below. Assertive and robust responses to Russian actions in the air are one such example. Air interactions carry the potential for a managed conversation of increasingly robust tactical steps to deliver messages. These include replicating Russia's practice of carrying out uncomfortable intercepts and manoeuvring into positions from which an engagement could be launched,

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51 Giles, 'Assessing Russian Success and Failure', pp. 125–6.
52 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, speaking at Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI) seminar 'Deterrence à la Russe', 1 June 2021.

up through releasing flares, to finally directly threatening steps such as a missile lock. In this context, but as a principle that should be carried over to other domains of interaction with Russia, it should be remembered that the possibility of an actual clash in the air resulting from a combination of irresponsible Russian airmanship and a NATO counterpart enforcing known and communicated rules of engagement would serve to set boundaries but not necessarily start a war – as was the case for Turkey in November 2015, an incident also examined further in Section 4 below.

Overall, it is vastly harder to deal successfully with Russia without sending firm messages, backed up by demonstrable seriousness about contingency planning. This kind of state interaction is considered normal by Russia – as witness its own practice – and hence is not provocative. Rather, it is unwillingness to practice deterrence and a visible lack of resolve that constitute the greatest provocation for Russia to act.

Transparency

But for Western countries, clarity of messaging, coupled with a degree of honesty and transparency, is also essential with regard to their own populations.

It is impossible for any democracy to defend itself effectively against threats of which the bulk of its population remains unaware. Political support for meaningful defensive measures depends on having an electorate that is sufficiently well informed about the kind of challenges it is being defended against. But the fine detail of Russian covert operations detected by the West has often by default been kept confidential, for a range of reasons including the need not to disclose either capabilities or vulnerabilities.

More recently, however, despite the absence of any official national or international statement on change of policy, key Western allies appear to have shown greater willingness to avow Russian actions publicly, with the intent of disrupting and deterring forms of hostile activity below the threshold of war, including cyberattacks.[53] As the case study below makes clear, coordinated disclosures by a number of Western powers of details of hostile actions by Russia appear to indicate a new and successful multinational policy of transparency on the handling of selected incidents. US public indictments of foreign state intelligence officials, and the UK's release of limited information that enabled third parties to independently identify the Salisbury attackers, set precedents for revealing information that previously would have been confidential, and confirmed the emergence of a number of new trends. The unprecedented level of detail disclosed by the Netherlands' intelligence services in exposing Russian GRU officers in October 2018 signalled a new departure in state practice on cyber conflict. The effect of these actions is in each case augmented by substantial international cooperation to maximize the impact of transparency.

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[53] Smith, A. (2018), 'Norway calling out Russia's jamming shows European policy shift', NBC News, 24 November 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/norway-calling-out-russia-s-jamming-shows-european-policy-shift-n937886 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Case study. Coordinated disclosures of hostile actions

Late 2018 saw two instances that appeared to indicate an internationally coordinated policy of transparency over hostile actions. In September, the British government disclosed limited details of the two suspects in the poisoning of Sergey and Yuliya Skripal in Salisbury, UK. This came the day before a debate initiated by the UK in the UN Security Council, which showed evidence of a long period of painstaking multilateral diplomatic preparation. Ambassadors from the US, France, Germany and Canada backed the UK's assessment in prepared statements,[54] while a round of responses from other countries represented on the Security Council either condemned Russia or were cautiously equivocal, depending on how much each country had to lose from publicly criticizing Moscow. Over 20 countries subsequently supported the UK in its allegations against Russia, expelling more than 100 Russian diplomats in total.

The UK government's response to the Salisbury chemical weapons attack included releasing as much detail on the incident as was possible without compromising the ongoing criminal investigation. This was highly effective in mobilizing international support and minimizing opportunities for Russia to deflect blame. In addition it empowered independent media, including in Russia, to pursue their own investigations, leading eventually to the exposure (and consequent reduction in value and utility) of entire cohorts of Russian intelligence officers.[55] This clearly demonstrates how maximum possible transparency over Russian actions can be an important enabler for policy responses.

A month later, international coordination over disclosures was also evident in the distribution by the Netherlands of highly detailed information on an attempted close-quarter cyber break-in by GRU officers at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague in April of the previous year.[56] The UK and US joined the Netherlands in making near simultaneous announcements. A British government statement promised further public action 'confronting, exposing and disrupting the GRU's activity' in close cooperation with allies.[57] And on the same day, following release of a report on Russia's systematic state-sponsored subversion of the sport drug-testing process, the US charged seven GRU officers (in some cases the same individuals) with hacking and related offences targeting a wide range of sporting and drug control organizations. As in other cases, the indictment included highly detailed descriptions of the activities and tradecraft of individual GRU officers.[58]

54 Dewan, A. and Bashir, N. (2018), 'World leaders back UK's Novichok nerve agent allegations against Russia', CNN, 6 September 2018, https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/06/uk/uk-russia-novichok-us-france-germany-canada-intl/index.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

55 Bellingcat Investigation Team (2018), '305 Car Registrations May Point to Massive GRU Security Breach', *Bellingcat*, 4 October 2018, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2018/10/04/305-car-registrations-may-point-massive-gru-security-breach (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

56 Government of the Netherlands (2018), 'Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service disrupts Russian cyber operation targeting OPCW', 4 October 2018, https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2018/10/04/netherlands-defence-intelligence-and-security-service-disrupts-russian-cyber-operation-targeting-opcw (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

57 Foreign & Commonwealth Office (2018), 'Minister for Europe statement: attempted hacking of the OPCW by Russian military intelligence', 4 October 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-europe-statement-attempted-hacking-of-the-opcw-by-russian-military-intelligence (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

58 US Department of Justice (2018), 'U.S. Charges Russian GRU Officers with International Hacking and Related Influence and Disinformation Operations', 4 October 2018, https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-charges-russian-gru-officers-international-hacking-and-related-influence-and (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

The apparent new willingness by the US, UK and other core allies to disclose hostile operations in fine detail suggests not only a recognition that this approach is effective, but also a shared perception of an escalated Russian challenge. This reflects the wide range of threats emanating from Russia,[59] and in particular the broad range of hostile cyber activities undertaken against the US, including for example against key utilities and infrastructure.[60] In the UK, a new readiness by senior figures to acknowledge publicly the challenge of ongoing offensive activity from Russia has been discernible from approximately early 2018, with fortuitous timing for the response to the Salisbury incident.[61]

Conclusions and lessons learned

Transparency and international coordination may in the medium term enhance the capability of Western nations to implement effective deterrence of sub-threshold activities. This is not because of direct consequences for those who are involved in those activities. Public identification of Russian perpetrators, even if accompanied by indictments, is of limited direct effect if they are unlikely ever to reappear in a jurisdiction where they could be arrested and tried. In addition, 'naming and shaming' a perpetrator only achieves half the intended effect if the perpetrator, like Russia, is immune to shame. It has even been suggested that Russia may be appreciative of the publicity, since 'just as with so many other aspects of Moscow's geopolitics, there is a theatrical aspect … as the country tries to assert an international status out of proportion with the size of its economy, its soft power and arguably even its effective military strength'.[62]

Instead, the primary value of transparency at present in dealing with sub-threshold operations is in sweeping aside their perceived anonymity and immunity.[63] This approach could and should also be applied to a much broader range of hostile activities carried out by Russia against Western nations, so that publics in those countries are better informed as to the nature and scope of the challenge – for example releasing information on the mission profiles of Russian aircraft practising for missile launches against Western Europe, or on cross-border electronic warfare activities targeting Nordic and Baltic states.

59 Popescu, N. and Secrieru, S. (eds) (2018), *Hacks, Leaks And Disruptions: Russian Cyber Strategies*, Chaillot Paper No. 148, Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_148.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
60 Smith, R. and Barry, R. (2019), 'America's Electric Grid Has a Vulnerable Back Door – and Russia Walked Through It', *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 January 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-electric-grid-has-a-vulnerable-back-doorand-russia-walked-through-it-11547137112 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
61 Dearden, L. (2018), 'Britain has entered 'new era of warfare' with Russian cyber attacks, Defence Secretary warns', *Independent*, 15 February 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/russia-cyber-attacks-notpetya-gavin-williamson-defence-secretary-putin-hacking-ransomware-a8212801.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
62 Galeotti, M. (2018), 'Heroes of the Fatherland: Killing Here, Hacking There', *Moscow Times*, 25 December 2018, https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/heroes-of-the-fatherland-killing-here-hacking-there-63901 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
63 Heckman, J. (2018), 'WH cybersecurity coordinator seeks more 'naming and shaming' of hackers', Federal News Network, 29 January 2018, https://federalnewsnetwork.com/cybersecurity/2018/01/wh-cybersecurity-coordinator-seeks-more-naming-and-shaming-of-hackers (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

The final key benefit of an internationally coordinated response to Russian aggressive action, however, is a demonstration of solidarity between allies. Examples of Western nations operating in close harmony and mutual support bring obvious practical benefits for all parties; but in addition they increase the perceived difficulty for Russia of targeting the unity of NATO, of the EU and in general of the Euro-Atlantic consensus on the rules-based international order.[64] In particular, they will reduce Russia's confidence that it can carry out hostile actions against an individual foreign country, be it a minor power or the US, without incurring a response that is unified and multilateral, and hence of much greater impact.

2. Demonstrate solidarity and will

Visible unity and credible intent are core components of successful deterrence by the West.

A united front

Russian power is often a function of inattention, policy incoherence, division or disunity among Western powers, including the US. These factors, and any resultant lack of clarity on the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, are inherently destabilizing; as described in one Russian study: 'The lack of strategic goal-setting by Western partners hinders the shaping and implementation of the Kremlin's foreign policy, thereby forcing it to continue feeling its way.'[65] But if Russia decides to engage in open conflict with a NATO ally, its risk calculus must include the assessment that there would be a slow and/or de-escalatory response from the rest of the alliance. It follows that any suggestion that the response from the US or the rest of NATO would be anything less than resolute and united is dangerously provocative. Discussion of containing a conflict, in particular, risks being interpreted as a desire to restrict engagement to one NATO ally to protect others. Alliance solidarity therefore depends on Russia not concluding that if it targets a specific country for hostile action, the conflict can be restricted to the territory of that one country.

Case study. Countering Moscow's expansion through unity

Today's concerns over the defence or reinforcement of the front-line states in Europe parallel to a striking degree a similar challenge faced by the US in the early to mid-1980s: how to protect partner states in the Persian Gulf region from possible military intervention by the Soviet Union, in the context of its apparent desire to expand its power southwards, as evidenced by the invasion of Afghanistan.[66] Then,

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64 Barnes, J. (2020), 'U.S. Cyberforce Was Deployed to Estonia to Hunt for Russian Hackers', *New York Times*, 3 December 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/03/us/politics/cyber-command-elections-estonia.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

65 Dynkin, A., Baranovsky, V. and Kobrinskaya, I. et al. (2017), 'Russia and the World: 2017 IMEMO Forecast', *New Perspectives* 25 (1), p. 85.

66 Fukuyama, F. (1981), *The Soviet Threat to the Persian Gulf*, Santa Monica: RAND, https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P6596.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

as now, US Army and other service planners grappled with the difficulty of contingency planning, exposing severe challenges in planned force structure, logistics, sea and air lift and other support capabilities. The difficulty of projecting power into the region was similarly exacerbated by time and space asymmetries favouring the Soviet forces. Responses, then as now, included reviewing the pre-positioning of equipment and supplies, exercises addressing specific geographical vulnerabilities, and the preparation of facilities for the reception and staging of incoming US forces.

In so far as no Soviet move on the Gulf region took place, these measures can be said to have succeeded; but there are also instances from history where expansionist moves by Moscow have been halted by a clear demonstration of will by the US in solidarity with its allies. This is particularly true of the period immediately following the Second World War – another time when Moscow took advantage of fluid political situations to maximize the extent of its power and control. In early 1946, the USSR was scheduled to remove its troops from northern Iran, at the expiry of a joint agreement with the UK on military presence in the country. In keeping with the political mood between the major powers at the time, British troops remained in place in apprehension of Soviet intentions, while the US favoured rapid withdrawal. Resolute public commitments to Iranian sovereignty by the major powers, expressed through the new medium of the UN, eventually led to a Soviet capitulation and the withdrawal of troops. This palpable success encouraged further readiness to stand firm in the face of Soviet demands; the US in particular 'regarded their position on Iran as a test of Western firmness and especially as a means of demonstrating the workability of the international peacekeeping system centred in the United Nations'.[67]

Shortly afterwards, the Soviet Union sought to impose on Turkey similar demands to those that had been presented to the Baltic states and Finland at the beginning of the Second World War. On this occasion, however, Britain and the US made it plain that they would back Turkish resistance. The result of this clear demonstration of resolve was restraint of the Soviet Union, and eventual NATO membership for Turkey.

The Sèvres agreement (1920), the Lausanne agreement (1923), and the Montreux Convention (1936) mandated Turkish control over shipping through the Black Sea Straits. The USSR, seeing this as a constraint on its projection of military power, sought to amend this arrangement or replace it altogether. In the context of discussing a post-war settlement between the victorious Allies, at the Yalta conference in February 1945 Stalin and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov made persistent attempts to convince British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that a new settlement for the Straits was a priority.[68]

The 1925 Soviet–Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality was due to expire in November 1945. In March, Molotov had announced that the USSR would not renew it, and consequently Ankara sought to negotiate a new treaty. For this purpose, Turkish ambassador to Moscow Salim Sarper met Molotov on 7 June. While expressing an interest in signing a mutual assistance treaty, Sarper ruled out renegotiating

67 Hess, G. R. (1974), 'The Iranian Crisis of 1945-46 and the Cold War', *Political Science Quarterly*, 89 (1), pp. 117–46, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2148118 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
68 Roberts, G. (2011), 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Iran, and Turkey, 1943–8', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 46 (1), 2011, p. 73; see also Hasanli, J. (2011), *Stalin and the Turkish Crisis of the Cold War, 1945–1953*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011, pp. 87–8.

control over the Straits as this was not a bilateral issue but affected a number of different countries.[69] In response, Molotov put forward territorial claims on Turkey, demanding control over the provinces of Kars and Ardahan as a precondition for treaty negotiations.[70] Throughout the rest of 1945, the USSR continued to press Turkey and the Western Allies for joint Soviet and Turkish control of the Straits,[71] including the establishment of military bases there.[72] Britain in particular took the view that joint control would prejudice Turkish security, in addition to seeing the territorial demands as a clear violation of Turkish sovereignty.[73]

By August 1946, the nature of the Western Allies' new relationship with Moscow was clear, and over the course of negotiations and with continuing British pressure, the US concluded that in the event of the USSR pressing its demands, 'the only thing which will deter the Russians will be the conviction that the US is prepared, if necessary, to meet aggression with force of arms'.[74] In response to further Soviet attempts to place bases on the Straits, the US dispatched the USS *Franklin Roosevelt* (its newest aircraft carrier) to the region as a show of strength with British support, as a joint indication of willingness to resort to force to constrain Soviet expansionism.[75] In March the following year, the speech by President Harry Truman which later became known as the Truman Doctrine specifically referred to assistance to Greece and Turkey, and represented both a formal call for the US 'to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures', and the effective replacement of the UK in this global role.[76] Shortly afterwards, Turkey began to receive large quantities of US military aid, and in the face of this open support, Soviet pressures and demands started to weaken. The robust stance adopted by the UK and the US to contain Moscow's expansionist goals was later assessed as representing 'one of the first successful results of a containment policy in the region'.[77] In 1952, Turkey joined NATO, and after Stalin's death Soviet territorial demands in this area faded away.

69 Roberts, 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery'.
70 The two provinces hosted populations of Armenian and Georgian descent, and had been part of the Tsarist empire from 1878 until 1921, when they were transferred to Turkey. Roberts, 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery'; Hasanli, *Stalin and the Turkish Crisis*, p. 107; Sotnichenko, A. A. (2010), 'Советско-турецкие противоречия в 1945-1950 гг. в условиях формирования Ялтинской системы международных отношений' [Soviet-Turkish tensions in 1945–1950 in the context of the formation of international relations based on the Yalta system], Труды Исторического факультета Санкт-Петербургского университета [Works of the St Petersburg University History Faculty journal], N2, http://statehistory.ru/5550/Sovetsko-turetskie-protivorechiya-v-1945-1950-gg--v-usloviyakh-formirovaniya-YAltinskoy-sistemy-mezhdunarodnykh-otnosheniy (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
71 Roberts, 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery'.
72 US Department of State (1945), 'No. 1369, Proposal by the Soviet Delegation', Foreign Relations of the United States; Diplomatic Papers, the Conference of Berlin (the Potsdam Conference), vol. II, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Berlinv02/d1369 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
73 De Luca, R. (1977), 'Soviet-American Politics and the Turkish Straits', *Political Science Quarterly*, 92 (3), p. 519, https://www.psqonline.org/article.cfm?IDArticle=10200, quoted in Roberts, 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery', p. 77.
74 US Department of State (1946), 'The Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of State at Paris', Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, The Near East And Africa, Volume VII, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1946v07/d659 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
75 Avey, P. C. (2012), 'Confronting Soviet Power: U.S. Policy during the Early Cold War', *International Security*, 36 (4), p. 172, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41428123 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
76 The Avalon Project (2008), 'President Harry S. Truman's Address Before A Joint Session Of Congress, March 12, 1947', available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
77 Bilġin, M. S. and Morewood, S. (2004), 'Turkey's Reliance on Britain: British Political and Diplomatic Support for Turkey against Soviet Demands, 1943-47', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40 (2), 2004, p. 49, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289898 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Conclusions and lessons learned

This case study illustrates two key points introduced earlier in this paper: the importance of firm responses to Russian demands or threats, backed up by the visible means of resisting them; and Moscow's willingness to back down when confronted. But it also points to two further principles that are relevant today.

An important baseline for understanding how Russia views the rest of the world is that while Western allies may see areas such as the Black Sea, the Baltic, Central Asia, the Arctic and the Sea of Japan as distinctive geographical regions, to Moscow they are all 'Russia's borders' – and events in one area are interlinked with those in another. In the case of the Straits crisis, timing was significant. While robust responses by the UK and the US were the primary factor in the USSR's withdrawal of its demands, a contributing factor was concurrent activity in Eastern Europe, which remained Stalin's region of geopolitical priority throughout this period. The subjugation of Germany and the imposition of Soviet control over other east European states in the face of protests from the UK and US were the most pressing issues for Stalin, and this may have limited Moscow's inclination to force confrontation elsewhere.[78] The lesson for today is that Russian challenges, and the means of deterring them, should not be thought of as regional, since Russia is present – and subject to influence and messaging – in many regions simultaneously.

The case study also illustrates both the benefits and the challenges of working through alliances, in this case between the US and Britain. Towards the end of the Second World War, Churchill wished to pursue a firm and robust line of deterrence of the USSR, and was dismayed by Truman's tendency to view it as a benevolent and well-intentioned ally. Churchill's warnings were vindicated by Soviet behaviour immediately after the end of the war, in the same way that Poland and the Baltic states – long dismissed as alarmists and trouble-makers within NATO and the EU for warning of the threat of a resurgent Russia – found themselves fully vindicated when these warnings became reality after 2014. In the case of Turkey – as with Iran – British resolve contained Soviet ambition until the US grasped the nature of Soviet intent and the urgency of countering it. But at the same time the US found that it would need to take on the long-term burden of doing so almost single-handed. The UK, faced with the reality that it had been bankrupted by the Second World War and was crippled by war debt (primarily to the US), withdrew from security commitments that were no longer sustainable. Its capacity for global power projection and security assistance collapsed rapidly, leaving the US as the partner primarily responsible for funding the deterrent mission.

But this did not mean that the UK ceased to demonstrate examples of capability and resolve that contributed to deterrence of Moscow, as the following case study shows.

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78 Roberts, 'Moscow's Cold War on the Periphery', p. 78.

Case study. The Falklands War

In 1982, the Soviet Union studied the course and outcome of the Falklands War intently. Besides the direct lessons for naval operations of the 'first war of the missile age', the Falklands campaign vindicated the effectiveness of a well-trained and highly motivated volunteer force, and in particular its ability repeatedly to assault and overcome a mixed professional and conscript force of superior numbers in contravention of all recognized minimum acceptable ratios of attackers to defenders.[79] Despite the remoteness of some aspects of conflict as waged in the Falklands from what might be encountered in Europe, this ability was of direct relevance to the respective capabilities of the conscripted Soviet Army and its all-volunteer US and British counterparts in Germany.

But while the UK's ability to swiftly mobilize and retake the islands was as surprising to the USSR as it was to many Western (and British) observers, it was the demonstration of political will to do so that made the deepest impression. The UK showed itself willing to mount a major operation at extreme risk to defend an apparently marginal interest, against daunting odds, on principle. In so doing, its 'readiness to protect an even tiny group of citizens from subjugation by an aggressor also vindicated that important part of the Western tradition which upholds freedom despite material cost'.[80] Today, Russia continues to recognize the significance of the 'primacy of morale-psychological factors over material factors';[81] and demonstrated will to defend citizens and sovereignty, in order as far as possible to remove doubt in the minds of Russian planners as to whether encroachments on them will be responded to, remains a key element of continuing deterrence of Russia across the board.

3. Support allies early

There is no substitute for having meaningful assistance to allies already in place before a crisis begins.

Forward deployment

Russia can exploit its asymmetric advantages of presence, speed of decision-making, will to act and ability to act unilaterally to swiftly establish facts on the ground in the form of a physical presence of Russian troops where they should not be. If this affects a NATO ally, then by presenting NATO with a *fait accompli* Russia forces the onus of escalation onto an alliance whose objective is to preserve peace – thereby suggesting a failure of that objective and presenting an immediate challenge to NATO unity. In seeking to counter or prevent this scenario, seriousness

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79 Kipp, J. W. (1983), 'Naval Art and the Prism of Contemporaneity: Soviet Naval Officers and the Lessons of the Falklands Conflict', *Stratech Studies SS83-2*, October 1983.
80 Mastny, V. (1983), 'The Soviet Union and the Falklands War', *Naval War College Review*, May–June 1983, 36 (3), pp. 46–55.
81 Adamsky, 'Deterrence à la Ruse'.

in contingency planning, including proving the will and capability to deliver assets where they are required, is essential. Speed is a deterrent, as it allows arrival at the point of crisis fast enough to keep options open, as opposed to having to fight a way in. If a US or NATO response to Russian action is delayed, Russia will portray it as escalatory, and this would find sympathy among nations that – for a wide range of reasons – would prefer not to take action. In short, the need to force the decision to escalate on Russia at the outset requires placing NATO forces in Russia's way, such that a Russian decision to move is clearly and unarguably a decision to escalate from peace to war.

Furthermore, if Russia feels it has the upper hand in a confrontation, and in particular if it has succeeded in putting troops in place on the territory of a Western ally, then a negotiated settlement and de-escalation will not be an option, unless it is to impose a ceasefire drafted in Moscow (see case studies in Section 6 below), or Russia believes it can be offered something in return for withdrawal that is worth the trade. Such options could, for example, include renegotiation of a front-line state's relationship with NATO, removal of missile defence assets, or dismantling of one or several other collective security arrangements that cause neuralgia for Moscow. In addition to all efforts to deter pre-emptive moves by Russia, the West needs to be ready for Russia to set its price for withdrawal if they succeed.

The way to avoid this situation is to demonstrate consistently both the will and the ability to defend against aggression, and to indicate that there is a plan and the capability to bring assets to theatre when required. But this in turn requires subduing the narrative that a strong defensive posture and demonstrated readiness are provocative and escalatory. Russia promotes this narrative at any opportunity in order to induce its adversaries to self-deter from taking action and thus erode the political credibility of deterrence, and in doing so it has at times succeeded admirably in causing its international partners to forget that it is by no means a military or economic superpower. It remains the case that Russia wishes to project an image of overwhelming military power in order 'to step up Alliance dependency on force protection and affect Nations' perceptions of risk and therefore our public opinion and political will to intervene'.[82] But blanket statements that a given action will 'provoke' Russia to a damaging response are not helpful. What is necessary instead is a sober assessment, based on past Russian practice, not on Western fears or concerns, of the point at which Russia would respond and how it might do so. The results of this assessment give very different results from a policy of restraint derived from giving excessive credence to Russian rhetoric, so it is fortunate that multiple recent case studies are available as empirical precedents.

When facing Russia, consistent experience suggests that deterrence by denial reliably trumps deterrence by response or punishment. It is cheaper, it is easier, and although it may not seem so in advance, it is politically more acceptable than the alternative. If NATO is reluctant to pre-position substantial forces in a threatened area, then in the event of open conflict it must be prepared to accept much more costly and politically challenging alternatives in order to fulfil its function and reason for existence. This could, for instance, include fighting past

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[82] North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (2015), 'Framework for Future Alliance Operations', August 2015, available at http://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/media/doclibrary/ffao-2015.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Kaliningrad in order to defend or – quite possibly by that stage – reconquer the Baltic states. This in turn would imply having to reduce Russian air and sea area denial systems without the benefit of local air superiority – a profoundly uncomfortable and unaccustomed situation for NATO forces. Furthermore if NATO leaders did indeed show the political will to order an operation of this kind, it would be even easier for Russia to portray this as unnecessary escalation – and that view would have support from wide sectors of European domestic populations and politicians even before the Russian propaganda machine went to work.

> **If NATO is reluctant to pre-position substantial forces in a threatened area, then in the event of open conflict it must be prepared to accept much more costly and politically challenging alternatives in order to fulfil its function and reason for existence.**

In the meantime, there is a linear relationship between a smaller NATO presence in the front-line states and a greater likelihood that some form of military action will seem feasible to Russia. In precisely the same way, Russia's use of its military assets becomes more, not less, likely as they continue to be improved and acquire a greater and more flexible range of capabilities.

Within this context, the deployment of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) units in the Baltic states and Poland represents an effective means of ensuring that any conflict there would necessarily involve other NATO nations. The utility of eFP lies not in presenting a realistic obstacle to a full-scale Russian incursion but in removing any doubt as to whether such an incursion could be written off as a bilateral issue between Russia and the target state. In addition, eFP has been paving the way for further development of NATO presence in the four countries, by developing and refining appropriate rules of engagement, administrative and legislative support for presence, basing and hosting arrangements, and the movement of troops, equipment and supplies across NATO borders – including removing bureaucratic impediments to doing so – both during and before a crisis. Furthermore, the forces in place not only deny Russia easy conventional military opportunities; they also stand in the way of a range of other measures currently described as 'hybrid' threats but that rely on there being no robust response from the target nation or from NATO.

But while forward deployment of any NATO troops will have a deterrent effect, the presence of US troops in particular provides additional benefits.[83] Russia may risk targeting smaller individual nations within NATO, or the Alliance itself, to attempt to erode the will to support the front-line states, but the United States represents an adversary of a different order of magnitude. As put by former senior

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83 Gouré, D. (2019), 'To Deter Russia, the U.S. Army Must Be Permanently Based in Poland', *RealClearDefense*, 16 April 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/04/16/to_deter_russia_the_us_army_must_be_permanently_based_in_poland_114337.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Estonian defence official Sven Sakkov, 'the simple fact is that the military deterrence value of American soldiers is the highest in the world'.[84] In 2021, rotations of a US battalion through Lithuania have had a disproportionate reassurance effect compared with deployments of other nations.[85] Requests for a greater forward presence by the US Army will therefore continue indefinitely. But the fact that at the time of writing no final resolution to this debate has been found reflects the fine balance of interests arguing both for and against a substantial permanent forward US presence.

For: A consistent historical principle referred to throughout this paper is that there is no substitute for substantial and capable forces for the purpose of facing down Russia; and in addition, these forces must be pre-positioned where needed in order to offset Russia's advantages of presence and speed.[86] A 2020 RAND study on the deterrent impact of US overseas forces arrived at entirely unsurprising conclusions regarding the impact of forward deployment, including that 'the ability of crisis deployments to prevent no-notice or short-notice *faits accomplis* launched by highly capable adversaries is limited' and 'we found the clearest evidence for the deterrent impact of [forward deployed] heavy ground forces'.[87]

The level of forces deployed must be sufficient that if they are engaged by Russia, it generates an incident of sufficient scale that it cannot be ignored. Unlike during the Cold War, when the certainty that conflict would be widespread reinforced deterrence, the willingness of NATO allies to join collective defence cannot be assumed; the danger persists that less robust member states could choose to accept a *fait accompli* presented by Russia, regardless of the circumstances through which it arose. The presence of troops from NATO allies at the epicentre of the confrontation would reduce that possibility to a minimum. It would also most probably overcome any domestic opposition within the ally in question to responding firmly to a Russian attack.

In addition to an enhanced deterrent effect, and the related benefit of greater reassurance for allies achieved through a demonstration of enduring commitment, permanent forward presence brings strictly practical advantages. These include lower overall financial cost, and improved quality of life for service personnel (with follow-on benefits in the form of improved morale and retention).[88] Although the financial price of any increased deployment of allied forces on the eastern flank of NATO is negligible compared with the cost of a war with the Russian Federation, greater affordability should be a significant factor when considering the inevitable long-term commitment entailed by forward deployment.

84 Maza, C. (2018), 'Is Donald Trump Right? U.S. Military Should Be Permanently Stationed In Eastern Europe To Protect NATO From Russia, Allies Argue', *Newsweek*, 13 November 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/us-military-should-be-permanently-stationed-eastern-europe-protect-nato-1210455 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
85 Szymański, P. (2021), 'US Army in Lithuania: a new outpost on the eastern flank', OSW Analyses, 14 January 2021, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-01-14/us-army-lithuania-a-new-outpost-eastern-flank (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
86 Lanoszka and Hunzeker, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe*.
87 Frederick, B. et al. (2020), *Understanding the Deterrent Impact of U.S. Overseas Forces*, Santa Monica: RAND, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2533.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
88 Deni, J. R. (2017), *Rotational Deployments vs. Forward Stationing: How Can the Army Achieve Assurance and Deterrence Efficiently And Effectively?,* Carlisle: US Army War College Press, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/408 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Accusations that such a move would constitute a huge increase in the number of 'NATO troops' in the front-line states, and therefore be highly provocative to Russia, should be countered by improved messaging from NATO pointing out that the real boost in numbers is far less significant – because the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian or Polish troops being supported are already in themselves 'NATO troops'.

Against: Opponents of forward deployment argue that the US should resist calls to boost its conventional force presence, since 'to do so could spark an expensive arms race with Russia that would heighten instability in Europe and could even provoke Moscow to use military force against one or more NATO countries'.[89] It is further suggested that closer physical proximity to Russia would constitute an invitation to pre-emptive action by Russia motivated by the prospect of the early destruction of high-value assets that are within easy reach and difficult to replace, whereas without them Russia would have no incentive to use military force.[90] Another, contrary argument holds that forward deployments should not be increased since no level of troop presence would ever be enough to provide total reassurance.[91]

In addition, some NATO members feel themselves constrained by the NATO Russia Founding Act's restrictions on permanent basing in new members, and NATO's commitment to ensure its collective defence by retaining the 'capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces' – without defining the term 'substantial'. However, no convincing justification has been offered for NATO's continuing to bind itself to a strict interpretation of the Act, whose provisions have long been made invalid by Russian aggressive actions in Europe. The Act specifically refers to the 'current and foreseeable security environment' of the late 1990s – no more relevant to the present day than its reference to a 'strong, stable and enduring partnership' with Russia (subsequently affirmed in the NATO Strategic Concept of 2010, itself long outdated).[92]

Whatever the arguments for and against forward deployment, defending the front-line states against Russia must be a primary responsibility for the West if it wishes to uphold both its security and its values. NATO's mission is to maintain security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area as a whole, and of allies without exception. Ensuring equal security for allies regardless of whether they are next door to Russia or not is core to this task, and it cannot be made conditional upon Russia's consent.

NATO's eFP initiative is a substantial step towards this goal, regardless of the relatively tiny number of troops involved. Arguments that it constitutes a threatening posture to Russia are misplaced: for Russia, eFP presents not a current problem but a precedent which may cause concern in the future. In a similar manner to US Ballistic Missile Defence installations in Europe, the effort to date is of limited

89 Marten, K. (2017), *Reducing Tensions Between Russia and NATO*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, Special Report No. 79, p. 4, https://www.cfr.org/report/reducing-tensions-between-russia-and-nato (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
90 Halas, M. (2019), 'Proving a negative: why deterrence does not work in the Baltics', *European Security*, 28 (4), pp. 431–448, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2019.1637855 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
91 Moller, S. B. (2019), 'Drawing the Line on U.S. Reassurance to Eastern Europe', *Lawfare*, 6 January 2019, https://www.lawfareblog.com/drawing-line-us-reassurance-eastern-europe (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
92 NATO (2010), NATO Strategic Concept 2010, 19 November 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82705.htm (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

significance, but the concern for Russia is that it provides grounds for expansion. In November 2006, not long after the accession of the Baltic states, a multilateral event at NATO Defense College in Rome heard from a group of senior Russian generals that Russia was unconcerned about NATO's presence in the new member states, and that it was the sovereign right of neighbouring countries to set up bases near the borders; 'but Russia will respond if forces are moved to higher readiness, are increased, or if the group of forces appears to take on an offensive nature'.[93]

It follows that there is significant deterrent value in the *possibility* of a high-profile and substantial US deployment closer to Russia. In considering placing more of its assets on the Russian border, the US holds Russia at risk of a development that it would find distinctly challenging and a response that would have real impact in Moscow. Open communication that a US forward presence will become more likely if Russia makes it necessary through further aggressive behaviour is likely to provide a significant counter-argument if Moscow considers such behaviour in the future; consequently such a deployment should not under any circumstances be publicly ruled out. In the meantime, the balance of risk and interest in the front-line states argues for a prudent mix of permanent and rotational deployments to make the best use of the relative benefits of each model.[94] One of the key tasks for these deployments should be assuring the possibility of delivery of reinforcements in time of crisis, which – in the Baltic at least – demands the continuous presence of allied naval as well as land forces.[95]

'Provocation'

As seen above, arguments against an assertive posture intended to deter Russia are frequently founded on the concern that Russia would see this as escalatory and provocative, and that this would trigger a crisis rather than preventing it. In the case of a forward military presence bolstering the front-line states, this line of thinking holds that 'the best way to get a near abroad that is less under the thumb of Russia is to do our best not to play into Russian fears that we are driving our tanks and the Western way into what they consider their backyard, which … is the best way to provoke a Russian reaction'.[96] More broadly, some assessments of the threat picture promoted by the Russian leadership worry that Western ignorance of Russian 'concerns' could 'provoke' it into war.

However, alarmist Russian reactions over the prospect of neighbouring states reinforcing their defences should not be taken at face value. Instead, they form a constant background noise to Russia's claims about what it requires for its own security, and it is instead any deviation from this norm that should be studied closely for any indication of a shift in Russian intent from rhetoric to action.

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93 Meeting attended by the author.

94 Breedlove, P. M. and Vershbow, A R. (2019), *Permanent Deterrence: Enhancements to the US Military Presence in North Central Europe*, Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/permanent-deterrence (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

95 Lange, H. et al. (2019), *To the Seas Again: Maritime Defence and Deterrence in the Baltic Region*, Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, https://icds.ee/en/to-the-seas-again-maritime-defence-and-deterrence-in-the-baltic-region (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

96 Charles Kupchan, speaking at Council on Foreign Relations Russia Symposium, New York, 13 April 2017, see https://www.cfr.org/event/responding-russia (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Russia would like Western publics and decision-makers to believe that any initiative to reinforce European security against Russia is de facto provocative, since naturally enough it would prefer such an initiative not to be taken. But the nature of the perceived threat to Russia is a constant, and not linked to any specific action by the US or its allies. Throughout Imperial Russian, and then Soviet Russian, and then post-Soviet Russian history, the West has always been seen as a looming threat regardless of the actual state of international affairs. The notion that protestations of friendship by foreign powers could turn at no notice into a surprise attack on Russia has repeatedly been borne out in history; but it is also applied today in an entirely different framework of international relations. This preconception is hard to challenge, given fundamental Russian assumptions regarding relations between states, and how these assumptions determine that Western actions appear threatening to Moscow even when their intent is entirely innocent or defensive.[97] As a result, Russia was complaining of an aggressive NATO even during the pre-2014 period while the US was withdrawing its forces from Europe and other NATO countries were drawing down their militaries.

The notion that protestations of friendship by foreign powers could turn at no notice into a surprise attack on Russia has repeatedly been borne out in history; but it is also applied today in an entirely different framework of international relations.

Paradoxically, the Russian perception of conflict already being under way argues against, not for, stronger defences in the front-line states being seen as provocative. For NATO to make military dispositions that are apposite to the risk of conflict seems normal and appropriate to Russia – as long as those dispositions do not include measures posing a realistic threat of swift offensive action against Russia, or the correlation of forces does not reach a tipping point that would require a response. Russia already presents NATO movements and presence as a direct counterpart to its own preparations for aggression; according to the Russian version, NATO is already present in force in the front-line states. In short, although the volume of Russian protestations will in no way be abated, defensive measures to respond to the Russian military build-up are not provocative to Russia because it fully expects them and considers them a natural state of affairs. It is also the case that if Russia were not complaining about the force posture of the US and its NATO allies, then those countries' armed forces would not be fulfilling their role of presenting an obstacle to Moscow's objective of unconstrained use of military power.

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97 A theme explored at length in two essential studies of Russian civilization and culture originally published in the 1970s: Szamuely, T. (1974), *The Russian Tradition*, New York: McGraw Hill; and Pipes, R. (1974), *Russia Under the Old Regime*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Appeasement

A related argument holds that Russian assertiveness can be tempered by a reduction in tensions brought about through concessions or expressions of goodwill towards Moscow, and that de-escalation by the US will be matched by Russia. This, unfortunately, overlooks the distinctive Russian approach to both compromise and cooperation at an international level.

Offers of cooperation with Russia are severely challenged by Moscow's underlying assessment that peaceful cooperation for the common good is not a normal and natural state of affairs. Henry Kissinger notes how this runs counter to long-standing Western assumptions:

> In the Westphalian concept of order, European statesmen came to identify security with a balance of power and with restraints on its exercise. In Russia's experience of history, restraints on power spelt catastrophe …. The Peace of Westphalia saw international order as an intricate balancing mechanism; the Russian view cast it as a perpetual contest of wills, with Russia extending its domain at each phase to the absolute limit of its material resources.[98]

The essential precondition for working with Russia – repeatedly forgotten when the US, or indeed NATO as a whole, seeks 'partnership' – is remembering that cooperation for its own sake is of no interest to Moscow. Russia continues to interpret concessions as weakness and as an invitation to demand more, rather than to soften a stance. Reaching international agreement through compromise and cooperation that go beyond direct self-interest is not in the spirit of Russian public diplomacy, and not in President Putin's nature. The fundamental and persistent principle, as described by John Lewis Gaddis, is that 'the Russians themselves would regard willingness to negotiate as a sign of weakness, and would raise their price for a settlement accordingly'.[99] A clear example is Russian behaviour in response to Japanese overtures and concessions towards signing a peace treaty resolving the long-running territorial dispute between the two countries: as former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe signalled increasing willingness to make concessions to reach an agreement, Russian demands progressively escalated and expanded.[100] One further damaging consequence of this is the Russian assumption that offers of collaboration or cooperation for its own sake, with no evident direct furthering of Russian state or leadership interests, are a ploy or a trap.

This instinctive rejection of cooperative solutions is reinforced by the belief that all great nations achieve security through the creation and assertion of raw power. In this view, one side's gain is automatically the other side's loss, and win-win situations are not envisaged.[101] The result is that Russia negotiates seriously only when it feels that its adversary holds some advantage and is willing to act on it.[102] In addition,

98 Kissinger, H. (2015), *World Order*, London: Penguin, p. 52.
99 Gaddis, J. (1982), *Strategies of Containment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 86.
100 Rodkiewicz, W. (2019), 'Russia/Japan: slim chances for a peace treaty', Centre for Eastern Studies, 23 January 2019, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analizy/2019-01-23/russia/japan-slim-chances-a-peace-treaty (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
101 Hosking, G. (2017), 'Putin is part of a continuum that stretches back to the tsars', *Guardian*, 4 April 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/04/putin-continuum-tsars-russia (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
102 Discussed in detail in Marten, 'President Trump, Keep in Mind that Russia and the West Think about Negotiations Very, Very Differently'.

concessions to find a mutually acceptable settlement are precluded by what security expert Pavel Baev calls 'the inescapable logic of confrontation according to which every de-escalatory move amounts to giving up to Western pressure'.[103]

At times, deliberately spurning established international agreements and acting as the disrupter can serve a secondary objective of achieving recognition for Russia, or the start of negotiations where Russia can enjoy the status of an equal partner with the US – if necessary, at the same time as continuing to function as the spoiler. When Russia presents a set of excessive demands, the West treats it as a success if Moscow is eventually satisfied with only some of them being met, no matter how unreasonable they may be. Furthermore Russian compliance with already concluded agreements is repeatedly presented as a concession. Russia can exploit this syndrome by destabilizing a situation in order to then offer the 'solution' – as in the case of dangerous behaviour risking collisions at sea and in the air, where a more appropriate solution than negotiations with Russia on new rules would be for Russia to abide by existing agreements and once more instruct its personnel to conduct themselves professionally (this situation is examined in more detail in Section 4, in the 'Close Encounters' case study).[104] In this model, Russia demands accommodations from others in order to restore relations after it has behaved egregiously – in Putin's words, 'we, as a people, say don't hold a grudge and we are ready to meet halfway, but that can't be a one-sided game'.[105] And toleration and acceptance of this approach by Western powers (for instance, accommodating requests for new bilateral commissions on preventing incidents provoked by Russia in the first place) will only encourage its further application.

The notion that there must be at least some common ground or interest where Russia and the US (or the West more broadly) share aims and objectives leads to a persistent search for issues on which the two sides see eye to eye – a search that repeatedly comes up with the same discredited answers. One such is counterterrorism – an alluring and seductive topic because, when phrased in Western terms, it stands to reason that both sides face the same threat and would be interested in joining forces to counter it. Even after the experience of Syria has made clear to the world the fundamental variance between the Russian and Western understanding of what the term means and who terrorists are, counterterrorism continues to serve as a dog-whistle issue where Russia can always get interest and engagement by offering cooperation. But in this area as in many others, 'much of the Western hope for partnership has been based on statements of faith rather than substantive assessment of Russian goals'.[106]

Overall, a wide range of terminology that sounds attractive to Western ears needs to be recast in its meaning to Russia in order to understand the true implications of what is offered to Moscow. In Russian terms, 'cooperation with

103 Baev, P. (2015), 'Russia Reinvents Itself as a Rogue State in the Ungovernable Multi-Polar World', in Lipman, M. and Petrov, N. (eds) (2015), *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?*, London: Palgrave Pivot, p. 77.
104 US State Department (1972), 'Agreement Between the Government of The United States of America and the Government of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas', https://www.state.gov/t/isn/4791.htm (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
105 Ostroukh, A. (2016), 'Russian president sees need to improve relations but flexibility needed', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-eu-need-to-improve-relations-says-putin-1466166833 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
106 Monaghan, A. (2016), *The New Politics of Russia: Interpreting Change*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 148.

Russia' means allowing Russia involvement, control and ultimately a veto on solutions to security issues worldwide. And now, just as in the last century, 'What the Kremlin means by detente is a state of coexistence modified to allow for temporary accommodations with the enemy in order to receive advantages and concessions which only he can give.'[107]

All of these considerations together suggest that the 2009 'reset' in relations between the US and Russia delivered entirely the wrong messages to Moscow. The good intentions and firm policy basis of the reset notwithstanding, by implying equal status for Russia, and normalizing relations with no conditions required in return, the US rewarded Moscow for its conduct during the armed conflict with Georgia the year before, and provided strong grounds for it to believe six years later, when it was contemplating seizing Crimea, that there would be few adverse consequences.

4. Enforce boundaries

Few things are more likely to encourage a given action by Russia than warnings against that action proving to be insincere.

Friction, boundary-setting and risk

Away from the front-line states, Russia's increased assertiveness since 2014 has led to a substantially increased incidence of direct contacts between the forces of NATO allies and those of Russia, or its proxies or agents. NATO forces and assets find themselves operating in close proximity to Russian forces in any domain: land, air, sea, subsea, space, the electromagnetic spectrum or cyberspace. The diversity of these domains is matched by the geographic diversity of the locations where close encounters can occur. To date they have ranged from the Arctic, down through the Baltic and Black Seas, to the Mediterranean, Iraq and Syria, the Pacific Ocean and along the coasts of Canada, Alaska and the Russian Far East.

While some principles of dealing with Moscow are timeless, the environments and manners in which Russia and NATO forces are now encountering each other are in some cases entirely new, in terms of physical or virtual space, force posture and political climate. It follows that lessons from previous periods when political or tactical miscalculation was possible, or actually occurred, must be assessed carefully for relevance before being applied to today's circumstances. Nevertheless, conclusions can be drawn from both recent and more distant incidents. This section therefore considers instances of provocative or dangerous Russian action in peacetime, with the aim of determining trends, common features and lessons learned against the background of ongoing developments in NATO–Russian relations overall.

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107 Crankshaw, *Putting up with the Russians*, p. 135.

Case study. Close encounters

In 1968 a Soviet Tupolev Tu-16 Badger, a large twin-jet bomber-reconnaissance aircraft, stalled and crashed into the sea after a very low flyby close to a US aircraft carrier, the USS *Essex*, in the Norwegian Sea. There were no survivors.[108] The incident carried multiple layers of risk. First, there was the obvious risk of collision (plainly a realistic possibility, since the Badger could equally well have crashed into the *Essex*). Second, potentially fraught with equally dangerous consequences, was the presence of a second Tu-16. Any element of uncertainty about the cause of the crash could have led to further escalation with unpredictable consequences, starting with retaliation by the second aircraft in the belief that the first had been shot down.

Incidents like this led Moscow to agree to the US proposal to sign the 'Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas' (INCSEA) in 1972. This agreement remains in force today, with the specific aim of preventing this kind of irresponsible and dangerous behaviour. As noted above, it should be recalled when Russia requests new international agreements to prevent inadvertent clashes at sea or in the air that these agreements already exist, and include specific provisions which dangerous actions by Russian Air Force and Navy personnel routinely breach.[109] The pattern of air and sea incidents that contravene arrangements like INCSEA overwhelmingly results not from misunderstandings but from deliberate, unprofessional and provocative Russian actions designed to extort concessions from the West. Multiple efforts have been made to address the risks posed by similar incidents between the US and Russia in recent years, but the results have been modest, primarily because Russia sees value in instrumentalizing brinkmanship. By engaging in these activities, it not only studies closely the tactical capabilities of its opponent, but also learns Western operational and political responses: the Kremlin therefore has no shortage of incentives to engage in provocations. But at the same time, any such incident carries with it the risk of unintended tragic consequences.

Sometimes these aggressive behaviours are designed to extract more specific concessions, such as driving NATO air operations away from Russia's vicinity. Russia hopes to leverage Western concern over a clash leading to inadvertent escalation as a mechanism for 'pushing adversaries away from strategically important areas and testing whether the West can be intimidated'.[110] This strategy appears, at least in public policy discussions, to achieve a measure of success. Some Western commentators suggest that the appropriate response to aggressive and dangerous interceptions of NATO aircraft in international airspace is to seek new discussions with Russia on how to reduce tensions and avoid these incidents, or even to pull back

108 Cenciotti, D. (2016), 'That time a Soviet bomber crashed into the sea after buzzing a U.S. aircraft carrier', *The Aviationist*, 14 April 2016, https://theaviationist.com/2016/04/14/that-time-a-soviet-bomber-crashed-into-the-sea-after-buzzing-a-u-s-aircraft-carrier (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
109 Giles, K. (2016), 'Russian High Seas Brinkmanship Echoes Cold War', Chatham House Expert Comment, 15 April 2016, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russian-high-seas-brinkmanship-echoes-cold-war (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
110 Weiss, A. S. and Ng, N. (2019), *Collision Avoidance: Lessons From U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021); Hamilton, R. E. (2018), *Russian and American De-Confliction Efforts in Syria: What's the Endgame in the Civil War?*, Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Hamilton2018.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

behind dividing lines, unrelated to the strict legal position on sovereignty, intended to separate Russian and US/NATO activities.[111] This approach is seriously flawed, because in common with similarly well-meaning proposals on renewed arms control negotiations, it presumes Russian interest in de-escalation – an interest that is plainly absent if Russia is disregarding international conventions, customs and common sense determining what constitutes safe and professional behaviour in the air and at sea. What is required instead is recognition of the problem that 'traditional deconfliction planning assumes *a priori* that everybody has a collective interest in assuring its success. But, when it comes to operational dealings with the Russian armed forces … that has usually not been true.'[112] At times, the objectives of Russian brinkmanship can be even more tactical and focused. In Syria, 'risky Russian maneuvers were frequently tied to narrow goals, such as forcing U.S. counterparts to hold a conversation on one of the deconfliction hotlines, schedule a face-to-face meeting, or adjust a deconfliction agreement in Russia's favor'.[113]

Since 2014, the frequency of air and air-sea encounters has increased dramatically. In 2016–17 a total of 146 air and sea incidents between Russia's and other nations' aircraft and vessels – chiefly air 'encounters' – was documented on the basis of open-source reports. Multiple incidents were classed by Russia's counterparts as 'unsafe and unprofessional'.[114] The list noted hazardous airspace violations; alleged near-collisions between civilian airliners and military aircraft; fighters making close passes by surveillance aircraft; warships harassed by aircraft; and exercises simulating attacks against targets on another state's territories. It also included a number of encounters involving shadowing of ships in international waters. More recent years have seen a continuation of the pattern, with repeated occurrences on land, at sea and in the air.[115]

In the air, there is ample potential for misinterpretation, especially when Russia practises for attack. Cases like this include an apparent simulated air attack against radar targets in Norway in March 2017, with Russian aircraft approaching, but not violating, sovereign airspace, and UK Royal Air Force aircraft routinely intercepting Russian Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack long-range bombers that approach British airspace or cross civilian airways without communicating with air traffic control. But the vast majority of air incidents incurring real and immediate danger involve Russian fighters conducting manoeuvres in close proximity to other aircraft.[116] In the words of a British Eurofighter Typhoon pilot after a Baltic Air Policing deployment, this routinely

111 Frear, T. (2018), *Lessons Learned? Success and Failure in Managing Russia–West Incidents 2014–2018*, London: European Leadership Network, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/11042018-Incidents-Management-Review-Tom-Frear.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
112 Clem, 'Risky Encounters with Russia'.
113 Weiss and Ng, *Collision Avoidance*.
114 Raynova D. and Kulesa, L. (2018), Russia–West Incidents in the Air and at Sea 2016–2017: Out of the Danger Zone?', London: European Leadership Network, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Military-Incident-Report.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
115 For examples see: AMN News (2020) 'Show of force: Russian military blocks US convoy in northeast Syria', 2 May 2020, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/show-of-force-russian-military-blocks-us-convoy-in-northeast-syria; US Navy (2019), '7th Fleet Statement on Unsafe Maneuver by Russian Destroyer', 7 June 2019, https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Statements/display-statements/Article/2240355/7th-fleet-statement-on-unsafe-maneuver-by-russian-destroyer; U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa Public Affairs and U.S. 6th Fleet Public Affairs (2020), 'Unsafe Unprofessional Interception of a U.S. Navy P8 by Russian SU-35s over the Mediterranean Sea', 26 May 2020, https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/News-Display/Article/2198048/unsafe-unprofessional-interception-of-a-us-navy-p8-by-russian-su-35s-over-the-m (all accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
116 Raynova and Kulesa, *Russia–West Incidents in the Air and at Sea 2016–2017*.

consists of 'doing stupid stuff close up to see if we will flinch'.[117] The suggestion that these Russian practices are not applied away from Russian airspace and are a response to what Russia regards as provocative behaviour near its territory does not withstand scrutiny. The regular dispatch of bombers with cruise missile carrying capability conducting practice attack runs against NATO allies and partners is not the only instance of Russia demonstrating aggressive intent away from its own airspace.[118] Russian bombers regularly 'patrol' in a threatening manner over the Black Sea, the Baltic and the Pacific.[119] And in June 2019, a Russian Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jet intercepted a US P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft over the Mediterranean three times within three hours, on one occasion conducting a highly dangerous high-speed pass directly in front of the P-8.[120]

At the same time, Russia has proved adept at exploiting information about clashes or near misses, and the need for NATO to demonstrate similar agility in the information domain is well recognized. There are numerous examples of how not to respond. In August 2019, an F/A-18 aircraft assigned to NATO's Baltic Air Policing (BAP) mission escorted Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu's aircraft. Video of the encounter was released by Russia, apparently to NATO's surprise. When asked about it by the media, NATO's spokespersons gave an unclear and evasive answer, not even identifying the Spanish aircraft involved as part of BAP. That led to entirely unnecessary speculation in Western media as to what exactly had happened. NATO finally released information confirming what aviation experts reviewing the video had already concluded: that Shoygu's aircraft had been escorted because, in contravention of commonly accepted air-traffic safety norms, it had not identified itself with a transponder; and that what the video showed was the Spanish aircraft reacting to a highly dangerous and unprofessional manoeuvre by one of the Russian escort fighters, which risked a collision. But NATO released this information 24 hours after the video became available – which was 23 hours too late. In the meantime, Western media had almost universally picked up and repeated the Russian version: that an inquisitive NATO aircraft had made a close approach but then retreated in fear of the mighty Russian Sukhoi fighter.

This is one instance that shows up multiple problems with the approach followed by NATO and some individual Western states. First, by not properly publicizing Russia's irresponsible behaviour, it cedes the information space to Moscow instead

117 Author interview, September 2019.
118 Cohen, Z. and Browne, R. (2019), 'US fighter jets intercept Russian bombers near Alaska', CNN, 9 August 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/08/08/politics/us-aircraft-intercept-russian-bombers/index.html; RFE/RL (2019) 'Russia Sends 'Nuclear-Capable Bombers' To Base Near U.S. Alaskan Coast In Exercise', 14 August 2019, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-sends-nuclear-capable-bombers-to-base-near-u-s-alaskan-coast-in-exercise/30110004.html; White, D. and Knox, P. (2019), 'RAF Typhoon jets scrambled twice in a day to intercept Russian bombers in UK and Baltic', *The Sun*, 8 August 2019, https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/9663600/raf-typhoon-jets-scrambled-to-intercept-russian-bear-bomber-and-two-fighters (all accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
119 Tass (2019), 'Two Tu-22M3 bombers conduct patrol mission over Black Sea international waters', 14 March 2019, https://tass.com/defense/1048703; Osborn A. and Lee, J. (2019), 'First Russian-Chinese air patrol in Asia-Pacific draws shots from South Korea', Reuters, 23 July 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-russia-aircraft/first-russian-chinese-air-patrol-in-asia-pacific-draws-shots-from-south-korea-idUSKCN1UI072; Tass (2017), 'Two Russian Tu-160 bombers escorted by fighter jets of 5 states during Baltic Sea flight', 17 September 2017, https://tass.com/defense/1078614 (all accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
120 Starr, B., Kelly C. and Cohen, Z. (2019), 'Russia intercepts US aircraft flying over the Mediterranean Sea', CNN, 5 June 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/04/politics/russia-us-aircraft-mediterranean/index.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

of properly educating Western publics about Russian brinkmanship and the restraint required when faced with it. In particular, it allows Russia to further the narrative that it is behaving responsibly, and that NATO is the provocative actor – a narrative far too readily repeated by US and other Western policy commentators.[121] But most importantly, as outlined in the section on 'Transparency' above, the lack of publicly available information about Russia's hostile actions leads to an inadequate perception of threat among Western populations, and among those political leaders who receive the same information flows and are sensitive to public opinion. As a result NATO nations continue to compete with limited authorities, while Russia believes it is already at war.

At sea, Russia applies the same pattern of behaviour, in what appears a concerted policy to challenge naval operations by the US and its allies at any promising opportunity. This too involves brinkmanship that is both dangerous and unnecessary. In a near collision between US and Russian warships in the Western Pacific in June 2019, the US cruiser USS *Chancellorsville* and the Russian destroyer *Admiral Vinogradov* came within metres of each other following what US 7th Fleet Commander Clayton Doss called an 'unsafe manoeuvre' undertaken in an 'unprofessional' manner by the Russian vessel.[122] Incidents of this kind continue in various ocean regions, including in January 2020 in the North Arabian Sea, when according to the US Navy the USS *Farragut* was also put at risk of collision by a Russian Navy warship.[123]

Both in these cases and closer to Russia's own waters, the aim demonstrated in multiple incidents has been to give the impression that US ships being where they were was inherently hostile and provocative – so they should stay further away from Russia. In 2016 John Kerry offered an unusually robust commentary on one of many instances of harassment of the USS *Donald Cook* in the Baltic Sea. A member of the Russian parliament responded that the US 'ought to know that the *Donald Cook* approached our borders, and might already have been unable to depart them'.[124] The message to US politicians is intended to be an alarming one; but if it leads to political pressure to cease operations in Russia's immediate vicinity, this would constitute a success for Russia and an invitation to engage in further provocative and dangerous behaviour.

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121 As for instance in Raynova and Kulesa, *Russia–West Incidents in the Air and at Sea 2016–2017*.
122 BBC News (2019), 'Russia and US warships almost collide in East China Sea', 7 June 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-48553568; and Smith, S. (2019), 'Video shows Russian destroyer nearly colliding with U.S. warship', CBS News, 7 June 2019, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russian-destroyer-admiral-vinogradov-nearly-collides-uss-chancellorsville-warship-today-2019-06-07 (both accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
123 US 5th Fleet (@US5thFleet) (2020), 'While the Russian ship took action, the initial delay in complying with international rules while it was making an aggressive approach increased the risk of collision. 'The US Navy continues to remain vigilant and is trained to act in a professional manner.', tweet, 10 January 2020, https://twitter.com/US5thFleet/status/1215658823471501315 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
124 Lenta.ru (2016), 'В Совфеде и Госдуме ответили на угрозу США сбить облетевшие «Дональд Кук» Су-24' [Federation Council and State Duma respond to US threat to shoot down Su-24 that overflew the Donald Cook], 15 April 2016, https://lenta.ru/news/2016/04/15/parliament (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Case study. Direct clashes

But it is the experience of direct clashes between NATO and Russian force elements involving actual losses that could provide the most important lessons for management of incidents. At the time of writing, a number of instances of encounters between Russia and other countries are available for study from open sources. Three of these merit close attention in order to draw specific conclusions on Russian behaviour.

Russia and Turkey

In November 2015 a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24M that had repeatedly crossed briefly into Turkish airspace from Syria. Both Sukhoi aircrew ejected but the pilot was killed as a result of (Syrian rebel) enemy action. The firing of a missile by the F-16 had been preceded by multiple warnings. This was an instance of Russia ignoring rules of engagement that had been clearly signalled, and previously enforced, by Turkey. US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford reportedly contacted his Russian counterpart, General Valery Gerasimov, and in an effort to deter any impulsive Russian moves against coalition aircraft in response, he confirmed that the US would take any necessary action to defend itself.[125]

Russia's response to the incident is highly instructive. Putin described Turkey's actions as a 'stab in the back'. Additional military deployments and economic sanctions followed, and under severe pressure from Russia, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan found it necessary to apologize publicly. But a key result of the subsequent political manoeuvring was that within two years, Russian–Turkish relations were closer than at any time in the previous century – with highly alarming implications for NATO.

While the route by which these improved relations was reached is complex, the underlying lesson is that escalation from an unplanned clash can be managed, and firm enforcement of red lines does not preclude a constructive relationship with Russia. It is an oversimplification to say that shooting down a Russian aircraft improved the overall relationship between the two countries. But there is no doubt that it introduced clarity. Furthermore a NATO nation demonstrated the will to enforce boundaries, and to follow through on previously declared red lines and rules of engagement, and the result was not a widespread escalation of conflict between Russia and NATO. Nor has it prevented Russia and Turkey from cooperating in the longer term on areas of mutual interest while compartmentalizing those issues where their interests conflict.

The Turkish incident has clear and direct relevance to management of airspace incursions in the Baltic region, where a pattern of possibly accidental infringements by Russian aircraft in the previous decade has been replaced by routine violations of airspace and air traffic norms, in particular flights by Russian military aircraft with transponders not activated, flight plans not filed, and failure to communicate with air traffic controllers.[126] The risk this presents includes the very real prospect that without remedial action by controllers and interception for identification by NATO aircraft, these flights could endanger civilian air traffic that would otherwise not be aware of them.

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125 Weiss and Ng, *Collision Avoidance*.
126 ERR News (2019), 'Russian ambassador summoned after aircraft breaches Estonian airspace', 24 September 2019, https://news.err.ee/983785/russian-ambassador-summoned-after-aircraft-breaches-estonian-airspace (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Russia and the US

Syria, as the location where US and Russian forces are currently operating in closest proximity, continues to provide case studies in deterring Russian assertiveness. The origins of the widely reported February 2018 incident at Deir ez-Zor, when an unconfirmed number of Russian private military contractors were killed or wounded by US fires disrupting preparations for an attack, remain murky, with speculation continuing on the level of authority at which the Russian operation was launched.[127] Despite conflicting accounts of the circumstances that led to the incident, and of the real chain of command and accountability on the Russian side, it is known that existing deconfliction measures between the US and Russia in Syria functioned as intended.[128]

In any case, the operation was launched with the assumption, expectation or hope that there would be no US response. When this response was delivered, and forcefully, it generated no official Russian protest, although it might ordinarily have been expected to provoke outrage and countermeasures. One possible explanation is that it was considered entirely justified under the circumstances: Russia had engaged in deniable probing of the limits of tolerable behaviour, and in doing so had asked a question of the US and received an answer. This supports the conclusion that, given Russia's higher tolerance both of casualties and of setbacks incurred in the course of exploring the boundaries of the possible, this incident should be seen as a successful demonstration of a red line being drawn and a message delivered that Moscow understood, internalized and acted on.

The result is likely to have been to set a boundary, and instil prudence in the planning of certain Russian operations; but this of course prompts Russia to probe elsewhere. In September 2018 the Al-Tanf base in Syria was once again the subject of threatening attention, with Russia stating its intent to enter the deconfliction zone around the base in breach of agreements with coalition forces. The local US response – a live-fire exercise calculated to demonstrate both capability and intent, accompanied by appropriate messaging – was precisely what was required to cause the Russian forces a change of heart. This incident too could serve as a template for how assertive and confident responses to Russian threats or demands consistently cause those threats and demands to evaporate.[129]

The 2016 US presidential election

In stark contrast to this pattern, the initial response by the US to Russian attacks on its democratic system during 2016 constituted an alarming failure of deterrence.

The Obama administration showed unwillingness or inability to respond in any meaningful manner to Russian cyber and information operations. As a result, Russian activities became more and more blatant and overt, gradually abandoning layers of deniability. The culmination was the practically open attack on the 2016 presidential election, and the series of prior and subsequent probing attacks on critical national

127 Sukhankin, S. (2018), "Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East', The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east (accessed 26 Jun. 2021)

128 Marten, K. (2019), 'Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35 (3), pp. 181–204, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

129 Pickrell, R. (2018), 'Russia threatened a key US base, and US Marines there just doubled-down with a threatening show of force', *Business Insider*, 7 September 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/us-troops-warn-russia-with-live-fire-exercises-in-syria-2018-9 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

and communications infrastructure, as well as destabilizing information campaigns attacking civil cohesion. For entirely different sets of wrong reasons, Presidents Obama and Trump both failed to elevate Russia's intervention in the US to the national priority that it should have been, or to respond to it vigorously enough to deter Russia or other hostile states from undertaking future attacks.[130] Despite clear and public statements by the US intelligence community attributing hostile political interference to Russia,[131] the Obama administration found itself still unable to respond appropriately.[132] A belated request to Russia to cease its interference, delivered shortly before the vote, was far too little and far too late.[133]

In effect, every aspect of the US response – dignified silence, polite requests, absence of meaningful countermeasures, unwillingness to draw public attention to the threat – met the criteria for how not to deter Russia. Subsequently, hopes that the incoming Trump administration might take a more robust attitude to Russian attacks on the US were swiftly disappointed.[134] According to cyber policy expert Jason Healey, 'there is now a well-documented example of cyber deterrence … Unfortunately for the United States, it was executed by Russia.'[135]

It was left to US law enforcement officials to develop a response to Russia without the support from the presidency that should have been automatic and unequivocal. Fortunately, they were aided by the new international willingness to confront Russian hostile actions, including in cyberspace, in close multinational cooperation, publicly and with greatly enhanced transparency, as described above in the case study on 'Coordinated disclosures of hostile actions'.

Conclusions and lessons learned

Russia will continue to test boundaries with the West, but if those boundaries are defended with tangible resolve, they will be respected. This will not prevent further probing elsewhere or by other means, however, as Russia seeks to expand the range of actions it can undertake without incurring costs or consequences. It follows that Western lines must be consistently held in the face of ongoing Russian attempts to shift them. Friction is inevitable, and confrontation cannot be avoided, because

130 Blackwill, R. D. and Gordon, P H. (2018), *Containing Russia: How to Respond to Moscow's Intervention in U.S. Democracy and Growing Geopolitical Challenge*, Special Report No. 80, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, https://cfrd8-files.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/CSR80_BlackwillGordon_ContainingRussia.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
131 Department of Homeland Security (2016), 'Joint Statement from the Department Of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security', 7 October 2016, https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/07/joint-statement-department-homeland-security-and-office-director-national (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
132 Miller, G., Nakashima, E. and Entous, A. (2017), 'Obama's secret struggle to retaliate against Putin's election interference', *Washington Post*, 23 June 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/world/national-security/obama-putin-election-hacking (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
133 Ignatius, D. (2016), 'In our new Cold War, deterrence should come before détente', *Washington Post*, 15 November 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/in-our-new-cold-war-deterrence-should-come-before-detente/2016/11/15/051f4a84-ab79-11e6-8b45-f8e493f06fcd_story.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
134 Deni, J. (2017) 'Eroding U.S. Deterrence', Carnegie Europe, 13 January 2017, http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/67675 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
135 Healey, J. (2017), 'There Is Now a Well-Documented Example of Cyber Deterrence', Defense One, 17 August 2017, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/06/not-cyber-deterrence-united-states-wants/149009 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

it is already happening. The process of establishing the limits of tolerance will continue to be messy and expensive, but it is essential for setting bounds to Russian assertive action and containing excesses in the future. The case studies above show how in the context of this process, the critical skill for Russia's adversaries is determining when irresponsible Russian behaviour should be treated as irritating and inconvenient background noise, and when it poses the threat of causing real damage, or when permitting it would allow Russia the freedom of manoeuvre to cause further, even more substantial harm.

5. Anticipate misunderstanding, miscommunication and miscalculation

Even best efforts to ensure clarity of communication will not ensure messages are received and understood.

The deconfliction mechanism set up by the US and Russia in Syria provides a good example of effective means to reduce the likelihood of accident or incident, and an example to follow at a time when many other channels of military communication have been curtailed, primarily as a result of Western policy. But even constant contact does not eliminate the potential for misunderstanding, including – in the context specifically of deterrent messaging – failures by one side effectively to communicate its interpretation of the other's signals and thus to confirm that a deterrent message has been received as intended. And this is just one subset of the wide scope for things going wrong as a result of miscommunication or misunderstanding. This is especially but not only the case when Russia is probing responses or engaging in deliberately dangerous behaviour in the air or at sea.

Of all the air or maritime incidents described above, only the example of Turkey in 2015 has as yet involved an actual clash or collision, deliberate or otherwise. But a precedent from the Cold War provides useful indicators of when miscalculation or political change could lead to a more serious encounter.

Case study. 1988 Black Sea ramming

As NATO allies consider or undertake freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in areas of high political and military sensitivity for Russia such as the Arctic and the coast of Crimea, an assertive response by Russia is assumed and expected – an expectation borne out by its reaction to the Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Defender*'s transit of the Black Sea in June 2021.[136] A previous instance of FONOPs leading to

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[136] Giles, K. (2021), 'Black Sea incident is Russia telling the same old story', Chatham House Expert Comment, 24 June 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/black-sea-incident-russia-telling-same-old-story (accessed 26 Jun. 2021). An alarmist commentary that nonetheless is based on sound summary of the analogous situation in the Arctic can be found at Auerswald, D. (2019), 'Now Is Not The Time For A FONOP In The Arctic', War on the Rocks, 11 October 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/now-is-not-the-time-for-a-fonop-in-the-arctic (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

a potentially dangerous confrontation is worth considering in detail for the lessons it provides on the multiple and complex factors that can lead to miscalculation in these circumstances.

Incident outline

In 1986 the US claimed territorial waters extending to three miles from the coast. The Soviet Union claimed 12 miles of territorial waters, a claim that the US accepted as long as free navigation was permitted through the additional nine miles. The USSR, however, only allowed foreign warships to travel unannounced within the 12-mile limit in restricted lanes, with any deviation from those lanes requiring advance Soviet approval. The US did not recognize these restrictions, and conducted freedom of navigation operations to contest them.

In early March 1986 the Aegis cruiser USS *Yorktown* and the Spruance-class destroyer USS *Caron* entered the Black Sea via the Turkish Straits. Their entrance was observed by a Soviet Krivak-class frigate, the *Ladny*, which shadowed them as they crossed towards the Soviet coast. On 13 March *Yorktown* and *Caron* entered Soviet territorial waters and remained there for just over two hours, sailing west along the southern coast of Crimea and coming within six miles of land. The *Ladny* continued to shadow them but took no action to intervene, and the Soviet response was limited to diplomatic protests after the fact.

In February 1988 the *Yorktown* and *Caron* repeated the operation but this time were confronted by two Soviet warships, the frigates *Bezzavetnyy* and *SKR-6*, which after issuing warnings both rammed the US ships.

There had been key developments on the Soviet side which meant the reaction in 1988 was far more robust than in 1986, but these changes may not have been visible to the US side, causing a potentially hazardous misalignment of assumption and expectation. Factors contributing to the USSR's unexpectedly assertive response fall under three broad categories: the operational context, political developments, and a mismatched understanding of what constituted legal freedom of navigation. Each of these will be examined in turn.

Operational context

Russia's rules of engagement had changed between March 1986 and February 1988, and this change may or may not have been discernible to the US.

A key development in the intervening period was the incident in 1987 when German private pilot Matthias Rust landed his Cessna light aircraft in Red Square. The evident confusion of Soviet air defence on how to respond to Rust's incursion provided a political pretext for the mass sackings of senior Soviet military officers; but it also led to a determination on the part of the Soviet Armed Forces to prevent similar embarrassment in the future. By February 1988, according to Vice Admiral Nikolay Mikheyev (at that time chief of staff of the Black Sea Fleet's 70th Brigade of anti-submarine warfare vessels), the Black Sea Fleet's mission was to prevent a US incursion 'by any available means'; so after the *Yorktown* and *Caron* had first

approached 'dangerously close to the closed area off the coast of Crimea' and then 'crossed the line into the forbidden area in spite of warnings', a confrontation was inevitable.[137]

The Soviet Navy had given careful thought to scenarios and methods for preventing a repeat incursion. However, the actions of the *Bezzavetny* in February 1988 were not one of these methods. The frigate had just returned from a Mediterranean cruise, and had started unloading its missiles and had released part of the crew for shore leave. However, it was allocated at short notice to meet the US warships as the destroyer *Krasnyy Kavkaz* was unable to put to sea because of 'technical problems'.[138]

Rear Admiral Vladimir Bogdashin, then commander of the *Bezzavetny*, considered that his only option after issuing warnings to the US ships was shouldering. Interviewed in 2008, Bogdashin commented that this was despite understanding 'that colliding with an object three times your size was in best case a fire, in the worst breaking up and foundering ... My ship had a displacement of 3,100 tonnes and they were 9,700. What could we do?'[139] This also suggests a potential factor for miscalculation that lies in asymmetry of attitude to risk. According to Bogdashin, speaking in another interview, 'the Americans are good sailors. But they are weaker psychologically. Dying for their Motherland doesn't feature in their plans.'[140]

After the first glancing collision, the *Bezzavetny* was ordered to withdraw but, according to Bogdashin, was forced to change heading back towards the *Yorktown* once more and ram it by the bows to prevent the sterns of both vessels – with loaded torpedo tubes on the *Bezzavetny* and Harpoon missile launchers on the *Yorktown* – from clashing, with the likelihood of fire or explosion.[141]

Political developments

The political climate of the time was predisposed towards reducing tensions and consequently avoiding escalation. According to US reporting at the time, 'Government officials said little would be made of the incident for fear of jeopardizing warming superpower relations'.[142]

However, if there had been a further escalation of confrontation over the incident, it is likely that the USSR's response would have been hard to predict and influenced by internal policy incoherence. The senior leadership in Moscow under Mikhail Gorbachev was rapidly adjusting to the context of thawing tensions with the US. A new minister of defence, General Dmitry Yazov, had recently been appointed, with a potentially different approach to rules of engagement. According to Admiral Vladimir Chernavin, commander-in-chief of the Soviet and Russian Navy from 1985 to 1993, his report to Yazov on the bumping incident met with incomprehension:

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137 Interviewed by Russian Pervyy kanal TV, 'Солдаты России. Жизнь на линии огня' [Soldiers of Russia: Life on the Firing Line], 2100 GMT, 20 February 2008, uploaded 15 May 2015, available at https://youtu.be/m1lLwn7I1kU?t=862, from 14.22 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
138 Ovchinnikov, A. (2012), 'Империя наносит последний удар' [The Empire Strikes for the Last Time], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 15 February 2012, https://www.kp.ru/daily/25836.3/2809165 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
139 Pervyy kanal TV, 'Солдаты России' [Soldiers of Russia]'.
140 Ovchinnikov, 'Империя наносит последний удар' [The Empire Strikes for the Last Time].
141 Ibid.
142 Thompson, M. (1988), 'Soviet, U.S. Ships Bump In Black Sea', *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 February 1988, available at https://www.inquirer.com/archives/past-articles (requires search for title and paid account to read).

> When I came to Yazov, he asked me what was going on down there in the Black Sea
> Fleet. I said nothing, all is as planned. He said, what do you mean planned, the General
> Secretary [Gorbachev] has just called me and said ships have collided and we are
> practically at war with the Americans! I said no, this is all as planned.[143]

As a further indication of confusion in Moscow over the appropriate handling of the
incident, Mikheyev and Bogdashin were congratulated and given commemorative
watches – after first being threatened with disciplinary action and told they would
have to pay for the *Bezzavetny*'s anchor lost in the collision.[144]

Legal position

A further source of confusion, and a primary cause of the confrontation, was differing
legal interpretations of what constituted permissible sailing in foreign territorial waters.

The US claim of innocent passage was open to legal question, since electronic
intelligence gathering was a secondary aim of the close approach to the Soviet
coast. But in addition, as noted above, at the time the Soviet Union recognized the
right of innocent passage for warships in its territorial waters solely in designated
sea lanes, but the US held that there was no legal basis for a coastal nation to limit
navigation in this way.

These interpretations were based on the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention; but after
the 1988 incident, a US Department of State investigation found crucial differences
between the English and Russian language texts of the Convention. The Russian text
allowed a coastal state to regulate the right of innocent passage whenever necessary,
while the English text did not. (Other differences were detected in the official text of
the Convention rendered in several other languages as well.)

In other words, in challenging the US warships' passage, the USSR was acting in good
faith and in accordance with its rights under the official Russian-language version of
the Convention.[145]

Conclusions and lessons learned

During this period of rapid political change in Moscow, it was to be expected that
the USSR's further actions after the incident were the subject of conflicting views
between Soviet Navy command, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the KGB.[146]
In this instance, Moscow joined with Washington in not escalating further, either
locally or elsewhere. But one final mismatch of perception was in the USSR's view
that the results of the incident constituted a successful outcome. According to
Bogdashin, ramming was a successful tactic because 'after that NATO vessels came

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143 Pervyy kanal TV, 'Солдаты России' [Soldiers of Russia].
144 Ibid.
145 Aceves, W. J. (1993), 'Diplomacy at Sea: U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations in the Black Sea',
Naval War College Review, 46 (2), pp. 59–79, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss2/6/
(accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
146 Ovchinnikov, 'Империя наносит последний удар' [The Empire Strikes for the Last Time].

no closer than 120 miles from our shores'.[147] This is patently untrue; but it is hardly uncommon for Russian narratives, whether for external or domestic consumption, to be entirely unconstrained by factual accuracy.

In summary, the responses of Russia and indeed other nations to movements by Western forces can be rendered unpredictable not only by deliberately provocative Russian behaviour at a tactical level, but also by a range of objective factors, all of which may or may not be detectable outside Russia:

— Political change at a senior level, and accompanying policy incoherence;

— Shifting perceptions and motivations among military commanders;

— Differing interpretations of legal rights and obligations between the two sides;

— Mismatched attitudes to and acceptance of risk;

— Varying concepts of what constitutes a successful outcome to confrontation.

6. Avoid conflict avoidance

Western, especially European, aversion to conflict has repeatedly been a key enabler for Russian objectives.

Readiness to escalate

Once relations with Russia deteriorate to the point where decisions need to be made about escalation, a key requirement for preventing Russia achieving its aims is not being seen to be desperate to avoid conflict. Defusing the confrontation must not be the only priority in an escalation scenario, since examples abound where Russia has achieved its goals through other parties being intent on preventing or ending the fighting, while Russia is more focused on ensuring it emerges from the process with advantage. The early stages of the crisis around Ukraine saw repeated offers of 'off-ramps' made to Moscow by Western leaders led by President Barack Obama in order to resolve the confrontation. All of these were entirely pointless, since they were made at a time when Russia was achieving its objectives.

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147 Ibid.

Conformity to this pattern invites a challenge described by Russia-watcher Oscar Jonsson: 'As long as the West is entirely predictable, Russia believes it can escalate cost-free because the West will always want to sit down and negotiate.'[148]

Case study. 21st-century ceasefires

In three armed conflicts (Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014–15 and Syria 2015–16) Russia has achieved strategic aims by exploiting Western preoccupation with ending conflict. The common feature in each of Russia's campaigns in this period was that major Western powers were induced to impose on Russia's adversary a ceasefire agreement drafted in Moscow, cementing Russian interests and legitimizing Russian demands even where Russia was the aggressor. The Georgian ceasefire agreement was overseen by French President Nicolas Sarkozy; the Minsk agreements by French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel; and a series of Syrian ceasefires was brokered by the US, primarily through Secretary of State John Kerry. Russia achieved its goals because each of these Western leaders prioritized ending the fighting, while Russia focused on winning the war.[149]

In Georgia, Sarkozy took over previously even-handed peace negotiations and drove through acceptance of a peace plan drafted in Moscow. In part this resulted from a false perception that Georgia could be overrun altogether, despite the absence of credible evidence that the storming of Tbilisi was ever seriously contemplated. In the six-point ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008, Sarkozy forced a disastrous concession on Georgia: that 'awaiting an international mechanism, Russian peacekeepers shall implement additional security measures'. In doing so, he gave Russia licence not only to retain its troops in the disputed territories, but also to establish an 8-km-deep 'security zone' beyond the administrative borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Subsequent EU protests that Russia was violating the ceasefire agreement by occupying the two disputed regions were easily countered by reference to the explicit permission granted to Russia in that agreement.[150]

Russia's military offensives in Ukraine in August 2014 and January 2015 introduced a dramatically new dynamic into the conflict there, and yet they represented escalations of influence as much as of conventional war-fighting. The January offensive formed the backdrop to threats delivered to Merkel by Putin himself to escalate the conflict to unspecified levels if his demands were not met. Despite her robustness up to this point, a key part of Merkel's cognitive matrix was the strong desire to avoid conventional, let alone nuclear war in Europe, and Putin exploited this sensitivity to the full.[151] In other

148 Oscar Jonsson, speaking at Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI) seminar 'Understanding the Russian Way of War', 20 May 2021, https://community.apan.org/wg/rsi/project-connect/w/events/29775/rsi-connect-understanding-the-russian-way-of-war (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
149 The outline of this process with regard to Georgia and Ukraine is based on analysis by James Sherr, previously published in Giles, K., Sherr, J. and Seaboyer, A. (2018), *Russian Reflexive Control*, Report, Ottawa: Defence Research and Development Canada, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328562833_Russian_Reflexive_Control (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
150 As predicted immediately after the signing of the ceasefire agreement in Giles, K. (2008), *The Nature of the Georgian Ceasefire*, Swindon: Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.
151 Putin had already issued similar threats to President of the EU Commission José Manuel Barroso. The Kremlin's furious reaction when he publicized the comments suggests that their purpose was intimidation rather than propaganda: CBS News (2014), 'Leaked Putin Comment on Ukraine Spurs Diplomatic Showdown', 2 September 2014, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/leaked-putin-remarks-on-ukraine-enrage-russia (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

words, he used a combination of direct military action and understanding of the psychological trigger points of his interlocutor to exercise reflexive control over her actions (and those of François Hollande). This was combined with a largely successful information campaign aimed at convincing the West that Ukraine was to blame for the failure to implement the Minsk protocols.

There were three main consequences of this exploitation. The first was the flawed and hastily concluded Package of Measures for Implementation of the Minsk Accords (Minsk II). The second was a decision to link sanctions, until this point tied to the return of Donbas to Ukraine, to implementation of Minsk II, which does not stipulate its return but its 'special status' and hence meets Russian objectives entirely. The third was the 'Normandy process', which continues to this day despite Russia's failure to honour any of the provisions of the prior agreements.[152] Overall, combining conventional kinetic activity with a sustained and multi-dimensional information campaign brought Russia success in ensuring a permissive environment for ongoing destabilizing activity against Ukraine, condoned by a notional ceasefire ensuring the protection of Russia's baseline interests.

In Syria, Russia exploited Western alarm and revulsion at atrocities against the civilian population, together with a campaign of reflexive control against US Secretary of State John Kerry, to arrive at a ceasefire agreement entirely in the interests of Russia and its partners. The agreement on a limited cessation of hostilities in Syria in March 2016, and its successor agreements, achieved some of the West's immediate aims of reducing the level of bloodshed and creating conditions for the delivery of urgent humanitarian aid. But it met a much wider range of Russian objectives, not limited to Syria itself.[153] Locally, the agreement achieved a Russian goal that had been consistent since the beginning of the conflict in Syria: halting military operations by opposition forces against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Those opposition groups that signed up to the ceasefire plan also agreed to join the next round of peace talks in Geneva, in exchange for the promise – later shown to be entirely insincere – of no further attacks by Assad's forces or Russia. This was in line with another key Russian aim: a negotiated transition of power in Syria, rather than the forcible removal of Assad previously insisted on by the US. But while Europe and the US were focused on the short-term aim of ending the fighting in Syria – or at least limiting it to operations against Islamic State (ISIS) – Russia remained focused on much longer-term goals including cementing its position as a power broker in the Middle East, eroding US power and seeking means of mitigating its exposure to criticism or adverse consequences over its actions in Ukraine.

The change in US policy from insisting on the removal of Assad towards possibly accepting him as part of a negotiated political transition represented a retreat in the face of Russian military assertiveness. The US in effect abandoned its allies: Kerry announced that the opposition groups supported by the US would make themselves targets for continuing air strikes and ground operations if they did not fall in with Russia's plans and sign up to the ceasefire and the political negotiations.

152 Sherr, J. (2017), 'Geopolitics and Security', in *The Struggle for Ukraine,* Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 11–13, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/10/struggle-ukraine (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
153 Giles, K. (2016), 'What Russia Learns From the Syria Ceasefire: Military Action Works', Chatham House Expert Comment, 3 March 2016, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/what-russia-learns-syria-ceasefire-military-action-works (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Case study. Failures of resolve in Syria and Kosovo

The March 2016 ceasefire was the second high-profile occasion on which Secretary Kerry had been used as a tool to endorse and validate a plan for Syria that was drawn up in Moscow. The first was in September 2013, when the Obama administration declared 'red lines' following the use of chemical weapons by Assad's forces. If these had been enforced despite Russian opposition, potentially including by means of the promised US strike on Syria, this would have represented a substantial reverse for Russia's policy on the conflict; it would have demonstrated the boundaries of Russian influence and left Moscow significantly less emboldened to undertake the seizure of Crimea less than a year later. Instead, the US administration's aversion to assertive action both displayed lack of resolve and handed the diplomatic initiative to Russia. Moscow responded swiftly to unguarded comments by Kerry by presenting a proposal for chemical weapons withdrawal that he was hardly able to refuse (despite its later proving entirely fraudulent). This validation of Russia's claims to decisive influence in the region – and to the ability successfully to influence US policy – constituted a major turning point in Moscow's views of its power and capabilities, with similarly highly damaging results for international security.[154]

There is no shortage of examples of Western powers not deterring but in fact encouraging Russian military adventurism. President Obama's declaration that there was 'no military solution to the confrontation in Ukraine' left Russia free to pursue its own military solution without fear of meaningful interference from the US.[155] Later, statements by European politicians that Russia must be part of the political settlement process in Syria because of its military presence there sent the message to Moscow that if Russia intervenes militarily in other regions in the future, it is guaranteed a voice or a veto in that region's political future.[156]

But the pattern for Russia's use of unilateral military intervention to insert itself into situations where it is subsequently accepted by all sides was set long before. Eighteen years before the incident in Syria that opened this paper, the confrontation between British and Russian troops at Pristina airport in Kosovo in June 1999 offers a direct parallel to the Russian threat to Al-Tanf in 2017, described at the start of this paper, but with diametrically opposite results.

With a four-hour head start on British forces entering Kosovo as part of K-FOR, 200 Russian troops arriving by road from Bosnia had time to establish a loose perimeter around the airport and block roads with armoured personnel carriers while awaiting reinforcement by air.[157] SACEUR General Wesley Clark recognized how failure to control the region's only airport, and the presence of an uncooperative Russian contingent,

154 Giles, K. (2017), *The Turning Point for Russian Foreign Policy*, Letort Paper, Carlisle: US Army War College Press, Strategic Studies Institute, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/292 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
155 Diehl, Jackson (2014), 'The sloppy thinking of 'no military solution'', *Washington Post*, 7 December 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jackson-diehl-the-sloppy-thinking-of-no-military-option/2014/12/07/8996eef6-7bd4-11e4-b821-503cc7efed9e_story.html.
156 Lobel, O. (2020), 'Russia's quest to make itself indispensable in the Middle East', *The Strategist*, 16 September 2020, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/russias-quest-to-make-itself-indispensable-in-the-middle-east (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
157 A RUSI study describes Russia's model for theatre entry as 'for a self-contained expeditionary contingent to establish a beachhead at an airfield or port, to emplace sea and air denial capabilities to protect the logistics hub, and then to airlift or sealift relevant capabilities to achieve the given mission'. It then continues, without irony: 'In an environment where the UK is already operating, one way to forestall such an eventuality is to occupy the relevant port or airfield.' Watling, *By Parity and Presence*.

presented a significant challenge to the success of the entire K-FOR mission. Accordingly, after acquiring explicit political authority from NATO Secretary General Javier Solana he gave orders for NATO troops to face down the Russian contingent and proceed to the airport as planned. But British commander General Sir Mike Jackson refused first to enter the airport perimeter without Russian cooperation, and subsequently to block the runway to prevent the arrival of Russian reinforcements.

Jubilant Russian television coverage with footage of ineffectual attempts by British armoured fighting vehicles to pass the Russian roadblocks while civilian traffic was allowed through freely left a lasting impression to set against recent memories of disaster in Chechnya.[158] More significantly, the *coup de main* in Pristina represented a successful post-Imperial intervention for Russia, a vindication of its persistent belief that it can act as a great power, and the first in a series of confirmations that bold military intervention is an effective means of resolving foreign policy challenges – and that Western powers will accept this and concede its results because they are unwilling to risk confrontation with Moscow.

The refusal of British commanders to follow orders and force the issue, on the basis that this would 'start the Third World War',[159] has since been presented as a successful peaceful resolution of a potentially highly dangerous crisis. But this refusal rested on two highly questionable assumptions: that the situation could not have been resolved without resort to lethal force, and that this in turn would have led to uncontrollable escalation involving Russian and NATO forces far from Kosovo. The proximate result, besides humiliation for British troops, was the unwanted parallel presence of Russian troops alongside, but not subordinate to, K-FOR.

But the British exercise of self-deterrence had adverse consequences that lasted well beyond the lifespan of K-FOR and the Russian presence in Kosovo. The crucial initial minutes of the airport encounter set a precedent and a reference point for Russia's continuing drive to project power far beyond its borders, and to strive for relevance and influence by means of military assertiveness, with all its attendant dangers for Russia's adversaries. More locally, according to Sir Andrew Wood. a former British ambassador to both Yugoslavia and Russia, it also contributed strongly to a persistent perception of close partnership between Russia and Serbia: 'Pausing at Pristina, in a period when Moscow was talking to Milosevic of conceding defeat while he could still do so and yet remain in office, helped to feed the idea that has grown since in Serbia itself that Russia is now on their side.'[160]

158 AP (2015), 'KOSOVO: RUSSIAN TROOPS STANDOFF WITH K-FOR TROOPS', AP Archive, 21 July 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6436f-Asg_w (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
159 BBC News (2000), 'Confrontation over Pristina airport', 9 March 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/671495.stm (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
160 Author's correspondence with Sir Andrew Wood, former British Ambassador to Yugoslavia (1985–89) and Russia (1995–2000).

Conclusions and lessons learned

In a number of cases, as outlined above, Western nations have accommodated and excused appalling behaviour by Russia, by imposing on its victims a ceasefire agreement drawn up in Moscow. But other opportunities too have been missed to set boundaries for Russian assertiveness. The confrontation at Pristina airport in 1999, if handled differently, could have served as a salutary reminder to Moscow of the limits of its power, at a pivotal moment in Russia's political, social and constitutional development. A similarly important opportunity was missed in Syria in 2013.

Once again the key asymmetry that needs to be adjusted in order for effective deterrence to be maintained is in the perceived willingness to implement forceful solutions. The lesson Russia learned from each of the above cases is that the West, including on occasion the US, is willing to prioritize avoiding conflict over winning it. Consequently, assertive or even aggressive action remains likely to achieve Russian objectives since the possibility is left open that it may not be opposed.

7. Deterrence by denial below the threshold of war

Resilience to 'hybrid threats' is mostly indistinguishable from best practice in ordinary governance

Russia remains aware that its military power will remain inferior to that of the United States, and of the US allies combined. This awareness will continue to stimulate a search for asymmetric means of prevailing in conflict. Alongside growing awareness of the multi-faceted and whole-of-government nature of the Russian challenge, the majority of US and allied military commanders must necessarily remain primarily concerned with kinetic capability. But Russia, if at all possible, would prefer a mode of conflict that renders that superior capability, and all the associated exquisite skills, equipment and technology, irrelevant.

'Hybrid' terminology remains firmly embedded in NATO discourse and beyond to describe grey-zone activities and unconventional warfare. But an at times excessive focus on hybrid threats has been unhelpful in describing the range of options available to Moscow. This is in part because the original and perfectly valid concept of hybrid warfare, relating to counter-insurgency operations, became stretched in all directions to fit campaigning by Russia and other adversaries, with the resulting proliferation of definitions militating against common understanding. More damagingly, the belief arose that the Western notion of 'hybrid warfare' was in fact a Russian concept and approach[161] – allied with the so-called 'Gerasimov doctrine', another phrase whose widespread misuse brought with it dangerous misconceptions about the nature of Russian security thinking.

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161 As explored in detail in Lasconjarias, G. and Larsen, J. A. (eds) (2015), *NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats*, Rome: NATO Defense College, https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication. html/195405 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

Russia will, of course, seek to exploit asymmetries in warfare – just as anybody fighting a war will do – but even without 'hybrid warfare' there are plenty of asymmetries in Russia's favour simply in terms of straightforward conventional forces. These include speed, presence, mass, unity of command, political will, and a decision-making structure which – in marked contrast to that of NATO – is designed to actually make decisions. At the same time, however, while a US presence in eastern Europe raises the cost for Russia of launching a traditional, conventional military assault on a NATO country, it has not deterred Russian whole-of-government efforts to attack, subvert and degrade its adversaries, including the US, and this will continue to be the case.

Moscow's belief that the insecurity of others makes Russia itself more secure depends on the dubious principle that there is only a finite amount of security in the world. But it also prompts Russia to engage in subversion and destabilization of states it perceives as adversaries, even if there is not necessarily a final objective in mind; simply weakening them will in relative terms make Russia stronger.[162] It follows that deterrent postures are also required to close off perceived opportunities for Russia in diplomatic, political, economic, information and societal confrontation,[163] as well as undesirable actions at a level below the strategic – such as campaigns of targeted assassination[164] or seeking to cause societal harm through sponsoring anti-vaccination campaigns.[165]

Since grey-zone activities also constitute a means of testing responses and deterrence, it can be noted that while Russia pursues low-intensity options to destabilize its neighbours and adversaries further afield, it is also consistently testing the credibility of the current international security framework and the overall principle of deterrence.[166] Potential responses must be considered wherever Russia pursues 'active measures' abroad via its intelligence and special operations agencies. Definitions of 'active measures' can be wide-ranging; in practical terms they cover activities 'from simple propaganda and forgery to assassination, terrorism and everything in between'.[167] Russian operations in the grey zone, while not entirely risk-free, rely on a calculation that the adversary (or more significantly its allies, including the US) will not escalate.

As such, in some instances they are an indication that Russia does not feel strong or confident enough to achieve its aims through overt measures. It follows that there is a strong argument for responding swiftly and forcefully to indications

162 Sanger, D. (2016), 'Putin revels in his role as disrupter of U.S plans', *International New York Times*, 1–2 October 2016, p. 1.

163 As detailed in the author's previous work including Giles, K. (2016) *Russia's 'New Tools' for Confronting the West*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2016/03/russias-new-tools-confronting-west-continuity-and-innovation-moscows-exercise-power (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

164 As in the case of the UK: see Blake, H. (2017), 'From Russia With Blood', Buzzfeed, 15 June 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/heidiblake/from-russia-with-blood-14-suspected-hits-on-british-soil (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

165 Henley, J. (2021), 'Influencers say Russia-linked PR agency asked them to disparage Pfizer vaccine', *Guardian*, 25 May 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/may/25/influencers-say-russia-linked-pr-agency-asked-them-to-disparage-pfizer-vaccine (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

166 Śliwa, Z., Veebel, V. and Lebrun, M. (2018), 'Russian Ambitions And Hybrid Modes Of Warfare', *Sõjateadlane (Estonian Journal of Military Studies)*, 7, pp. 86–108, https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/HybridModes.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

167 Abrams, S. (2016), 'Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia', *Connections*, 15 (1) (Winter 2016), pp. 12–13, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26326426.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

of Russian grey-zone activity, since hesitation is likely to allow it to succeed.[168] It could be argued that by disguising and disavowing its actions in Crimea, Russia showed it was not willing to risk military escalation. But responding to covert aggression with escalation lifts the conflict out of the grey zone and renders it no longer deniable, removing at a stroke several of Russia's key advantages. In addition, if front-line states follow the principle stated by former Estonian defence chief General Riho Terras – 'shoot the first little green man that appears' – this forces Russia either to back down, withdraw and deny any connection to the incident, or immediately to escalate to a level of conflict where an armed attack on the target state is undeniable, removing arguments for the rest of NATO not to become involved.

... the task is to ensure that the periphery of Russian control in Europe consists as far as possible of countries with well-organized, competent societies and competent militaries. This would ultimately render subversion ineffective, as domestic cohesion is an effective barrier.

In addition to willingness to escalate, Russia's neighbours can implement effective deterrence by denial of unconventional threats, through reducing the areas of weakness that Russia would seek to target in order to subvert and destabilize them. For instance, corruption at varying levels creates vulnerabilities which can then have much wider ramifications, whether allowing the undetected introduction of Russian covert funding which can then be spent on subversion, or simply allowing the capture of local elites and influencing the role they play in NATO and the EU.[169] In this respect the task is to ensure that the periphery of Russian control in Europe consists as far as possible of countries with well-organized, competent societies and competent militaries. This would ultimately render subversion ineffective, as domestic cohesion is an effective barrier. The best deterrence to 'political warfare' lies in creating sufficient societal resistance that subversion is likely to fail.[170]

Measures that will reduce the effectiveness of Russian methods of political subversion and unconventional warfare include:

— Recognizing the critical importance of good governance, including proper strategic regional policies, in order to avoid the emergence of neglected areas that can become disaffected – especially if those areas contain Russian minorities;

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168 Lanoszka, A. (2018), 'Stop calling every potential act of Russian aggression 'hybrid warfare'', International Affairs Blog, 24 May 2018, https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/stop-calling-every-potential-act-of-russian-aggression-hybrid-warfare-e980b3b888a9 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
169 Rogers, J. and Martinescu, A.-L. (2015), *After Crimea: Towards a New British Geostrategy for Eastern Europe?*, London: Henry Jackson Society, https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/after-crimea-towards-a-new-british-geostrategy-for-eastern-europe (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
170 Cederberg, A. and Eronen, P. (2015), *How can Societies be Defended against Hybrid Threats?*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/194510 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

— Investing in political early warning and situational awareness, including monitoring the sources of finance for political parties and organized crime groups, and granular monitoring of popular sentiment;

— Bolstering the capabilities and resources of internal security forces, including border security, customs and immigration control to prevent infiltration, maritime control to minimize unmonitored border crossing opportunities, counterterrorism capabilities and physical security measures;

— Developing the capability for highly mobile crowd and riot control, and the judicial capacity to deal swiftly with large numbers of detained individuals;

— Building social cohesion and ensuring democracy works, including by increasing resilience to malicious propaganda and projecting coherent messages;

— Placing systemic vulnerabilities at the core of exercises on hybrid warfare scenarios;

— Strengthening national conventional defence capabilities;

— Investing in provision for a long-term allied presence and for rapid reinforcement, including reception and staging infrastructure, and command-and-control elements capable of rapid expansion.

Building resilience in the face of Russian efforts to undermine the political or economic foundations of a nation can be a long-term and costly process. In the case of Ukraine, for instance, as the country is unable to prevent Russian efforts to control its maritime borders through measures such as interdiction of the Kerch Strait (by naval blockade or simply by building a bridge), the primary recommendation is to develop alternative export infrastructure.[171] But, as is commonly the case, the alternative to long-term investment in resilience is even greater costs resulting from increased exploitation by Russia.

At the same time, awareness of Russia's grey-zone and information warfare capabilities and the development of countermeasures should not distract from considering its conventional capabilities overall, since activities below the threshold of war or in other domains are an addition to conventional military power, not a replacement for it. Moscow's consistent experience throughout the last decade is that application of military force swiftly and effectively achieves strategic aims, with costs and consequences that are manageable by comparison with the gains made. The cessation of hostilities agreement in Syria in March 2016 discussed in Section 6 above was a notable example of US and Western capitulation to a limited demonstration of military will, with the US acquiescing to all of Russia's demands in exchange for a notional reduction in the level of fighting. In the following year, in surveying the nature of modern warfare, Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov focused on the continuing erosion of the boundaries between war and peace, and noted that it is more and more common for a country's sovereignty and national security to be threatened in peacetime.

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171 Lough, J. (2018), 'Western Countries Must Rethink How to Deter Russian Aggression Against Ukraine', Chatham House Expert Comment, 3 December 2018, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/western-countries-must-rethink-how-deter-russian-aggression-against-ukraine (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

But the response to 'new generation warfare', Gerasimov argued, should be a focus on conventional and nuclear readiness for high-end, high-intensity, high-technology war.[172] Russia's response to the changing character of war, he indicated, was not a pivot to focusing on 'hybrid' capabilities, but rather nuclear rearmament, investment in precision guided weapons, long-range strategic aviation, increased stand-off capabilities, electronic warfare, 'increasing the cohesion of society in support of the Armed Forces', and an overall mobilization of the economy and society.

Overall conclusions

Russia can exploit differences in strategic cultures between itself and Western powers. This includes greater willingness by Russia to accept risk, and to accept brief or protracted conflict as a means to further state aims, as evidenced in continuing operations in Ukraine and Syria.[173] A distinguishing feature in Russian conduct is a higher acceptance of risk and a lower threshold for the use of force, be it military or non-military. In order to avoid this trap, it is essential that Russia's adversaries also display willingness to exhibit a firm response to challenges, up to and including meeting force with force and maintaining escalation dominance.

A 2020 RUSI study noted:

> The prospect of actually harming Russians and the perceived escalatory consequences have had a genuine deterrent effect on Western planners in the past. However, a distinction must be drawn between the use of military force against Russians and strikes against forces contravening communicated red lines. Whereas the former is clearly escalatory, the latter has consistently proven not to be. The Soviet Union and the US avoided revealing direct confrontation, even as their pilots flew against one another in Korea and Russian air defenders knocked out US aircraft in Vietnam. Today, we observe Russia and Turkey, and Russia and Israel, playing down suggestions that Russian advisers may have been killed in drone strikes against SA-22s. Russia has persistently probed adversary red lines, but has withdrawn – rather than escalated – when it has suffered casualties, even in significant numbers. In short, the infliction of 'doses of pain' to enforce red lines has proven to provide an effective deterrent by punishment. The limited application of force has had a constraining effect on Russian operations.[174]

Two of the case studies explored above – the Russia–Turkey air encounter and the Deir ez-Zor incident – support the conclusion that given Russia's higher tolerance both of casualties and of setbacks incurred in the course of probing the boundaries of the possible, these incidents should be seen as a successful demonstration of red lines to Moscow. The lesson from both cases is that escalation from an unplanned clash can be managed, and firm enforcement of boundaries does not preclude a constructive relationship with Russia.

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172 Gerasimov, V. (2017), 'Мир на гранях войны' [The world on the edge of war], Военно-промышленный курьер [*Military-industrial courier*], 13 March 2017, https://vpk-news.ru/articles/35591 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
173 Wintour, P. and Borger, J. (2018), 'Syria faces perpetual war unless Russia extends ceasefire, France warns', *Guardian*, 24 September 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/24/syria-war-unga-france-warning-russia-extend-ceasefire (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
174 Watling, *By Parity and Presence*.

Crucially, Russia does not necessarily regard assertive action for the purpose of deterrence as provocative; rather, it is considered a normal part of interaction between states. This takes the form of a non-verbal conversation, since as Dima Adamsky notes, 'the deterrence equation, for the product of this cognitive milieu, is a function of one and one's competitor interacting, and not of mere static balances, an insight from which emanates another instinct – the inclination to constantly shape the adversary'.[175] Moscow is ready for this conversation to be robust: according to Daniel Flynn, 'since Russia is at war, for the Kremlin, there [are no] unacceptable forms of deterrence, compellence, or coercion'.[176]

This also highlights a dangerous false premise guiding many Western approaches to confrontation with Russia overall: the notion that Western states can choose whether they enter a conflict with Russia or not. This false premise underpins every action that simultaneously seeks to punish Russian hostility but also to 'avoid escalation'. This avoidance is counter-productive, since 'the more confident the Russian leadership is in the ability to manage escalation, and in the existence of workable war termination strategies in each possible type of war (local, regional, and large-scale), the more likely they are to engage in activities short of war or competitions in risk taking'.[177]

Russia mounts military operations not only when it believes that this is the only remaining way of achieving its political objectives, but also when it simply considers that this is likely to be the most effective solution. It is highly unlikely to start a war it believes it will lose. Actions intended to persuade Russia that it is imprudent to embark on overt hostile activity, therefore, should focus on those areas of capability and political will that cause it the greatest concern – tempered with caution that a perception of overwhelming inferiority and risk does not cause it to strike first before the balance of power deteriorates still further.

Missile strikes by the US and its allies in Syria, as a demonstration both of Western capability and of will, caused deep reflection in Moscow. Russia's fear of superior US capabilities which could deliver retaliation or deterrence by punishment based on cruise missiles backed by a massive aerospace advantage may have been displaced by Prompt Global Strike and hypersonic weapons,[178] but decapitation strikes targeting control structures remain a key concern as they were during Soviet times. Russia has a strong respect for the US ability to inflict damage on critical infrastructure; this mirrors its own concept of inflicting demonstrative damage on targets that cause disruption to civil society in order to deter an adversary.[179]

Sustainability is also a concern for Russia, since its capacity to conduct protracted warfare at a more intense level than that shown in Ukraine and Syria is in doubt. While Russia retains the capability to increase its armed forces in a crisis, the early

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175 Adamsky, *Deterrence à la Ruse*.
176 Flynn, D. J. (2019), 'Russia's Evolving Approach to Deterrence', in *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, NSI, https://nsiteam.com/social/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/SMA-Russian-Strategic-Intentions-White-Paper-PDF-compressed.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
177 Kofman, M., Fink, A. and Edmonds, J. (2020), *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, CNA Research Memorandum, Arlington: CNA, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
178 Congressional Research Service (2019), 'Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles: Background and Issues', https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41464 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
179 Reach, 'Review of Strategic Deterrence book'.

stages of its military overhaul following the 2008 conflict with Georgia involved dismantling the structures for full-scale and extended military mobilization. The US could underscore this concern by advertising continuing stamina for extended conflict, though this approach might be beyond the plausible reach of European allies.

But even before deterrent messaging that plays on specific Russian concerns, evidence of allied unity and will to act promptly and act together will have substantial deterrent value in its own right, by heavily weighting Russia's risk-benefit calculus against action. Plausible demonstrations of speed of recognition and decision-making in response to Russian initiatives, followed up by other shows of international solidarity, will help to prevent Russia from reaching the conclusion that it can take action against an individual Western nation without incurring consequences inflicted by its friends, partners and allies.

Meanwhile, however, Russia wishes to stoke fears in the West of miscalculation or misinterpretation leading uncontrollably to nuclear war. The success of this campaign in creating an impression of deteriorating stability and imminent danger can be measured by the number of influential Western figures who can be persuaded (often unwittingly) to endorse Russian messages, and with them Russia's preferred solutions. Claims of a 'deterioration of the European security situation in recent years' where 'incidents in the course of military activities which bring Russian and NATO forces into close proximity are worrisome in their own right and run the risk of escalation' and 'a real military confrontation becomes an increasing danger' (and hence where new – Russian-sponsored – agreements constraining military activities in Russia's vicinity are essential) have been signed by an impressive roll-call of former SACEURs, deputy SACEURs, chiefs of defence, defence ministers and NATO secretaries-general.[180] Given that NATO deterrence explicitly rests on the promise of escalation if attacked, senior figures from the organization signing up with their adversary to the proposition that NATO and Russia must agree urgent measures to restrict the possibilities of escalation represents a striking success for the Russian intent. According to a detailed study of Russian views on escalation management, 'the concepts underpinning Russian thinking [on this topic] have several objectives: managing escalation at existing levels, keeping the conflict bounded, deterring additional participants from joining, and reducing the cohesion of opposing coalitions'.[181] The last three of these objectives are directly antithetical to the interests and priorities of alliances like NATO, with its founding principles of mutual assistance against aggression.

The suggestion that the security situation in northeast Europe in particular is rapidly deteriorating has been accepted by many of Russia's interlocutors; unquestioningly, it seems, since as soon as it is questioned it becomes immediately clear that it is a proposition based on false premises. In 2021, the only destabilizing factor in Baltic security is the same deliberate Russian provocative behaviour (with the more recent addition of Belarusian unpredictability under Russian protection). In fact, 'the level of tension in the Baltic region has gradually declined from its level

180 Institute of Europe (2020), 'Recommendations of the Participants of the Expert Dialogue on NATO – Russia Military Risk Reduction in Europe', Russian Academy of Sciences, http://en.instituteofeurope.ru/publications/other-monographs/item/statement-on-russia-nato (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
181 Kofman, Fink and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management*.

in 2014–15, when both political tensions and the imbalance in capability were at their height'.[182] A key factor in this decline has been the start of attempts by NATO, and by NATO partner Sweden, to address the imbalance in capability by starting to fill the relative military vacuum in the region. In this process the contribution of NATO's eFP programme has been a resounding success, as much for its signalling of unity and political will among the Alliance as for its ability in itself to deter or – moderately – slow a Russian incursion.[183]

The suggestion that the security situation in northeast Europe in particular is rapidly deteriorating has been accepted by many of Russia's interlocutors; unquestioningly, it seems, since as soon as it is questioned it becomes immediately clear that it is a proposition based on false premises.

Nevertheless, the repeated pattern of success for Russia in its use of intimidation suggests that this is likely to be attempted again in the future, since consistent Russian practice, alongside considerable capacity for innovation, is to repeat a tactic for as long as it achieves success. This implies that in the event of future conflict, Moscow is very likely once again to seek to influence Western leaders to impose a ceasefire on Russian terms on the victim of Russian aggression. In the meantime, given the drivers for Russian provocative behaviours and brinkmanship outlined above, Western nations need to be prepared for similar incidents to continue for as long as Russia wishes to persist – or until a miscalculation leads to an avoidable tragedy.

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182 Sherr, J. and Hurt, M. (2020), 'Initial Reflections on the Recommendations of the Participants of the Expert Dialogue on NATO–Russia Military Risk Reduction in Europe', *ICDS*, 17 December 2020, https://icds.ee/en/initial-reflections-on-the-recommendations-of-the-participants-of-the-expert-dialogue-on-nato-russia-military-risk-reduction-in-europe (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
183 Lanoszka, A., Leuprecht, C. and Moens, A. (eds) (2020), *Lessons from the Enhanced Forward Presence, 2017–2020*, Research Paper No.14, Rome: NATO Defense College, https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1504 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

04
Outlook and policy recommendations

Dealing with a bitter and belligerent Russia will be a long process demanding both resources and resolve. Accepting this fact is an essential precondition for crafting effective deterrence policy.

Outlook

Since the seizure of Crimea provided a vivid reminder of the danger of Russian military assertiveness in 2014, slow but steady progress has been made in measures to ensure the security of the US' most vulnerable allies and partners. Nevertheless, some European leaders continue to signal that their greatest concern is not defeat, but war itself. By broadcasting this fear, and repeatedly announcing what they will *not* do to protect allies instead of what they will, they invite President Putin to manipulate their fears and thus sow the seeds of further aggression and armed conflict in the future. The US therefore continues to play a crucial role in contributing to European defence not only in military but also in moral terms by supporting those Western allies that do adopt a robust posture towards Russia. As put by former Estonian defence minister Sven Mikser, 'We believe that our allies will come to our help. We need Vladimir Putin to believe that too.'[184] The West as a whole, led by the US, must be willing to demonstrate that it has the resolve to resist Russia – up to and including the point of open conflict. If this demonstration is made – and made in a manner and on a scale that are recognized as meaningful in Moscow – a remarkable consistency of precedents suggests Russia will back down, just as it always has done throughout Soviet and Russian history.

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184 Speaking at Lennart Meri Conference, Tallinn, 22 April 2015.

However, Russia's ability to exercise what leverage it has to reshape the world as it would wish to see it has been facilitated by the state of US domestic politics for the majority of the Putin era. The unwillingness of the Obama administration to practise deterrence emboldened Russia to take ever more egregious and blatantly hostile steps in every domain except direct military confrontation with the US, realizing that in every other contest of will, the US was simply not showing up. Conciliatory policies and resets, if they take the form of offering incentives with no demand in exchange, for the sake of better relations with Moscow, will always be a mistake. During the Trump presidency, Russia could still rely on strong resistance from the White House to any initiative to contain or restrain its actions, but with the added challenge of unpredictability resulting both from the mood swings of the president himself and from his interactions with his advisers and the executive. Addressing the legacy of this extended period of uncertainty is one of the urgent tasks facing the Biden administration.

Former US Ambassador to NATO Robert Hunter has argued that 'U.S. grand strategy toward the European continent from April 1917 onward can be summarized as preventing the domination of Europe by a hostile hegemon or, at a minimum, by any country or empire that would seek to deny to the United States the prosecution of its own national interests'.[185] To truly deter Russia from more aggressive actions, the US needs to maintain a clear set of national security priorities, and demonstrate strong political will to enforce associated limits (the notorious 'red lines'). If Russia's belief that the boundaries set by the US will be defended starts to erode, they will be tested by ever more assertive grey-zone means, exploiting any ambiguity in policy, and probing until it is made clear where the hard limits are. Early clarity will render this process less costly and unpleasant for the United States itself, and even more so for those allies and partners it is seeking to defend.

Recognition that confrontation with Russia cannot be avoided because it is already happening, and acceptance that resolving this conflict will be a long, costly and potentially painful process, will underpin and augment the effect of any deterrent measures put in place. Understanding and accepting this basic clash of interests and world views inevitably means that alongside the concurrent challenge from China, the West must continue to invest heavily and for the long term in deterring Russia from aggressive and hostile actions. This deterrence must include willingness to impose costs and consequences on Russia in response to military adventurism, cyber and information assaults, or any of the other ways in which Russia endangers the integrity of Western states or the lives and livelihoods of their citizens. The process will inevitably be costly and damaging for both sides – but it has to be remembered that a failure to deter Moscow invites consequences that are far more costly and far more damaging.

It is axiomatic, and has been demonstrated repeatedly over history, that Russia respects strength and despises compromise and accommodation. This strength must necessarily include military power, present and ready for use, to provide a visible counter to Russia's own new capabilities. Some European nations

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185 Hunter, R. (2016), 'Geopolitics and the Problem of Russian Power', *Prism*, 6 (2), 12 July 2016, pp. 3–28, https://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM/PRISM-Volume-6-no-2/Article/834928/nato-in-context-geopolitics-and-the-problem-of-russian-power (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).

continue to act on the belief that maintaining strong standing armies and investing in hardware and manpower is an outmoded metric of national security. But Russia's traditional and persistent respect for brute military force as the key determinant of national status and the right to assert national interests means that Western states must respond in kind, because the maintenance of at least comparable conventional military capability is essential to ensuring that Russia does not perceive opportunities to further its interests – or to remove notional threats to itself – by military means.

Deterrence cannot stop Russia from wishing to damage the US and the West more broadly, and finding ways to do so where it thinks actions will remain either undetected or unpunished. This desire is based on attitude, convictions and world view, rather than on temporary or reactive policy. The best remaining option is to deter Moscow from intervention against members of NATO or the EU by causing it to believe that the costs will be too high because other members of the organizations will respond appropriately, as opposed to seeking a diplomatic solution or a back-door deal to evade their responsibilities and treaty obligations. This requires continuing demonstrations both of resolve and of global military capability that outweighs Russia's and can be brought to bear swiftly to inflict deterrence by punishment if deterrence by denial has failed. Critically, overall military superiority matters to Russia, as opposed solely to those assets and capabilities present in Europe. What Russia fears most is large-scale and protracted war with the US or with NATO as a whole, where all of this military power can be brought to bear, since the result of such a conflict is in no doubt. It follows that any measure by the US that gives rise to any doubt as to its military superiority – or as to the will to employ it – is highly damaging for its own national security and that of its allies.

A further consequence of Russia's historical consistency is that it is a profound mistake to identify the current confrontation with President Putin as an individual. According to Matt Rojansky of the Kennan Institute, 'Putin is a reflection of Russia … This weird notion that Putin will go away and there will suddenly be a pliant Russia is false.'[186] Indeed, 'Putin is not the reckless, unorthodox, swaggering Kremlin chief usually depicted in the West, but rather one operating in the mainstream of Russian policy for the last 100 years and more.'[187] The direct implication is that any strategy that will successfully deter Russia cannot be a short-term one. It must instead be designed to be sustainable over the long term.

For the nearer future, it should be recalled that events in Ukraine and Syria have emboldened Russia and once again demonstrated to Moscow the utility of military force for achieving strategic aims. The US and its allies need to have policies and plans in place for responding to the next use of that force.

186 Rohde, D. and Mohammed, A. (2014), 'How America Lost Vladimir Putin', *The Atlantic,* 18 April 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/04/how-america-turned-putin-against-the-west/360921 (accessed 26 Jun. 2021).
187 Kalb, M. (2015), *Imperial Gamble: Putin, Ukraine and the New Cold War*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press, p. xix.

Policy recommendations

In addition to the broad conclusions reached throughout this paper, the case studies and precedents lead to the following recommended principles for effective deterrence of Russia:

— **Recognize the limits of agreement:** It is a fundamental miscalculation to assume that Russia is interested in cooperation on Western terms, or that the West can improve the relationship through unilateral efforts. Conversely, a certain number of Russian attitudes are unshakeable. One is that the essential aim of Western policy is to expand its space of influence or bring about regime change in Russia. While Russia's actions can be influenced through deterrence or dissuasion, basic assumptions of this kind cannot.

— **Engage, but do not appease:** Calls for 'dialogue' in Western discourse often suggest that policymakers should empathize with Russia, concede to its demands, or at the very least offer conciliation. There is, however, a clear difference between engaging with Russia productively and sacrificing interests and values to accommodate the Kremlin or cooperate on Russia's terms. While dialogue is essential, what is said is even more crucial. Policy should not focus on appeasement, but should be about signalling determination and resilience to safeguard these values and interests.

— **Avoid rewarding provocation:** Russia has clear incentives to continue on its path of military provocation and non-military hostile activity. These incentives should be removed by establishing clear boundaries and parameters of acceptable behaviour, none of which impinges on the sovereignty or vital interests of the US or its allies. Defining red lines with regard to Russian actions will require coherence and unity among Western partners, and patience and resilience, with a realization that once a boundary has been set and recognized, Russia will start probing elsewhere along the full spectrum of warfare and activities below the threshold of war. Emphasis should continue to be placed on the certainty that NATO allies will be defended under Article 5 if attacked and that they do have the capacity to respond; but greater clarity is needed on responses to encounters at a lower level, of the kind described in this paper.

— **Avoid self-deterrence:** It is routinely suggested that clashes and close encounters may be the fault of the US or its allies for engaging in provocative behaviour. Russia does not necessarily consider deterrence to be provocative but the West needs to respond assertively in order to set boundaries and discourage, rather than encourage, further Russian brinkmanship. In particular, it is critical to recognize that an armed clash with Russia need not necessarily lead to escalation. As has been repeatedly demonstrated in the cases described in this paper, Russia accepts the loss of personnel, including aircraft and crew, as a normal and natural part of the messy process of establishing and defining inter-state relations.

— **Assess the full spectrum of threat:** NATO allies differ among themselves over where, and how, Russia presents a threat, in part because of differing attitudes within Europe to Russia as a whole. This lack of coherence – for instance on whether Russian activity in the economic domain, such as the Nord Stream 2

pipeline, is in itself undesirable because it harms NATO partners – leaves gaps for exploitation by Russia and will increase its willingness to test resolve. As the line between peacetime and wartime activities is increasingly blurred, allies should clearly identify Russian actions through the lens of full-spectrum warfare, namely as a continuum between military and non-military probing. The risk of cross-domain and cross-regional escalation, including in cyber warfare, should be considered systematically and by default.

— **Name and shame:** Despite apparent reluctance on the part of US and allied armed services to detail the level and potential dangers of Russian activity run against them, this paper and others have described precedents showing the clear benefits of transparency. Concealing the true nature, volume and intent of Russia's irresponsible behaviour cedes the information space to Moscow instead of properly educating Western publics about the brinkmanship practised by Russia and the restraint required from NATO partners. In particular, it allows Russia to further the narrative that it is behaving responsibly and that NATO is the provocative actor. But most importantly, the lack of transparency over Russia's hostile actions leads to an inadequate perception of threat among Western populations, and among those political leaders who receive the same information flows as them and are sensitive to public opinion. The result is that NATO members continue to compete with limited authorities, while Russia believes it is already at war.

— **Avoid trade-offs:** Policy commentators who argue for de-escalation by the West sometimes propose the use of geographical dividing lines around sensitive areas, unrelated to the strict legal position on sovereignty, with the intention of separating Russian and US/NATO activities. This would be a concession to Russia that met key Russian ambitions and rewarded irresponsible behaviour, and should be avoided.

— **Communicate and deconflict:** At the same time, although the Syria deconfliction agreement was unique to that conflict, aspects of the agreement may be applicable elsewhere. In particular, ensuring routinely and continuously open contact lines covering areas of high military activity, such as the Baltic and the Black Sea, would reduce the danger of unintended escalation and provide greater clarity as to Russian intentions – especially if, as in Deir ez-Zor, the Russian side denies something is happening when it plainly is.

— **Plan for contingencies:** Above all, contingency planning is critical, working from the basis that if current trends continue, it is a matter of when, not if, a serious incident will occur: an aircraft brought down, or a vessel damaged or sunk, or personnel on the ground suffering losses. For a whole variety of reasons, including escalation management, the calibration and careful planning of responses to these situations is essential. It is just as essential to clearly outline the 'rules of the road' – what is *acceptable* and *unacceptable* in Russian behaviour, including by measurement against international agreements to which Russia has already committed itself – for both sides to minimize the risk of miscalculation for mutual benefit and security.

About the author

Keir Giles is a senior consulting fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. He also works with the Conflict Studies Research Centre (CSRC), a group of subject matter experts in Eurasian security.

Keir's career began in aviation in the early 1990s, working with Soviet military and paramilitary aircraft in Crimea. With the BBC Monitoring Service, he specialized in military and economic issues in the former Soviet space, and in 2005–10 he was seconded to the UK Defence Academy, where he researched Russian military, defence and security challenges.

Keir is widely published on the topic of Russian military and non-military power projection. He is the author of *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West* (Brookings Institution Press/Chatham House, 2019), which examines the long-term causes of conflict with Russia.

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Cover image: President Vladimir Putin and Defence Minister Sergei Shoygu consider the flight data recorder of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M strike aircraft shot down after repeated violations of Turkish airspace, November 2015.
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