

Chapter

THE RISE OF A STRATEGIC SPOILER: RUSSIA'S EUROPEAN SECURITY STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was the latest step in Moscow's steadfast rejection of the post-Cold War security order in Europe. Nevertheless, analysts and scholars remain puzzled as to what exactly constitutes Russia's long-term game plan vis-à-vis Europe. This chapter suggests that, far from following a concrete, well-planned blueprint at the operational and tactical levels, Russia's grand strategic objectives enable Moscow to adopt a fluid, adaptive posture aiming at achieving two interconnected goals: to maintain, or even improve, the continental military balance of power through the deployment of strategic weapons and at the same time acquire the capabilities to disrupt NATO's air and naval superiority in critical flashpoints, an aspiration that had been elusive even at the peak of the Cold War rivalry. The implications of Russia's grand strategic doctrine are thus crucial for Europe's security outlook; Moscow's approach implies that Russian deterrence at the highest levels will be robust, while low-level, disruptive tactics in areas where Russia maintains an operational advantage could challenge the European security status quo. Contemporary developments, therefore, may enable Russia to undermine NATO's supremacy in the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical space, altering the post-Cold War order.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding post-Cold War Russia constitutes, without a doubt, a major challenge for analysts and scholars alike. During the Kosovo crisis in the 1990s, Russian and NATO troops operated in the same area, raising concerns at one point that the two sides would actually confront each other (Gobarev 1999). Nevertheless, it was not until the end of the 2000s that a

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series of failures to anticipate Russian behaviour forced NATO allies to commit substantial resources in an effort to better capture Russian strategic thinking (Osborne 2015). In recent years, the comprehensive reform of the alliance's doctrine and organizational structure, more specifically, was primarily aimed at monitoring and anticipating threats to Central and Eastern European countries (NATO 2014; 2015; CSIS 2015). Following the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, the American political establishment appeared willing to decelerate the country's so-called "pivot to Asia," assigning an unprecedented –for post-Cold War standards– number of "eyes and ears" to the close scrutiny of Moscow's motivations and capabilities (Gardner 2014).

Even now, however, several years after the initiation of Russia's revisionist posture in Europe, the West appears uncertain about Moscow's future conduct. To a certain extent, this is natural, as the re-emergence of Russia in European affairs remains a relatively new development. Until recently, numerous analysts in the West regarded Russian military capabilities with disdain (Gady 2015). Russia's first military foray in a foreign country after 1979 would soon function as a wake-up call to European and American military planners. The conflict over South Ossetia in 2008 escalated to open warfare between Moscow and Tbilisi, as the Kremlin reinstated Russia's sphere of influence, halting NATO's expansion, which had proceeded uninterrupted until that point.

More recently, the Crimean crisis culminated in Russia's first territorial expansion after WWII, at the expense of EU-backed and NATO-candidate Ukraine. Events in Ukraine rekindled threat perceptions at the highest echelons of power within the trans-Atlantic Community, eliciting the expectation that Russia would imminently target the Baltic States and possibly Poland (ECFR 2015; *The Guardian* 2015, 19 February). Moscow, however, chose to promote a "frozen conflict" scenario in 2015, under which Eastern Ukrainian provinces would avoid severing ties with Kiev. Odessa, a Black Sea port of great strategic value, did not, quite surprisingly for many, become a flashpoint for separatist forces. A further strategic surprise was on the way. A few months later, analysts were shocked to witness Russia's direct involvement in the quagmire of the Syrian war, which entailed a substantial commitment of political, economic and military capital, all during a year of financial stress and diplomatic isolation for Moscow (Dekel and Magen 2015).

The aforementioned examples indicate that the West is capable of both over-estimating and under-estimating Russian assertiveness. It is, therefore, not a matter of simply downplaying or upgrading evaluations of Moscow's determination to challenge the geopolitical status quo. A refined narrative is necessary: one that captures Russia's capacity to adapt effectively to changing circumstances and present its competitors with "faits accomplis" in a nuanced manner. In order to achieve this goal, an evolutionary approach to Russian security policy should turn the spotlight on the country's grand strategic military objectives, as opposed to analysing Russia's short and mid-term operational conduct. A "bird's eye" view of Russian post-Cold War behaviour, therefore, reveals a fluid, adaptive Russian posture which aims to achieve two distinct, yet interconnected goals: to maintain, or even improve to its favour, the continental military balance of power through the deployment of strategic weapons and at the same time acquire the capabilities to disrupt NATO's air and naval superiority in critical flashpoints.

RUSSIA'S RETRENCHMENT IN THE 1990s: ADAPTING TO A UNIPOLAR SYSTEM

The collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed NATO's geopolitical dynamic across the previously inaccessible Eurasian heartland. The resulting power vacuum in Russia's former periphery generated a window of opportunity, with the alliance swiftly responding to the call of Central and Eastern European capitals. Far from seeking revenge, Central and Eastern Europe sought to put its Communist past behind and become integrated into the West. In geopolitical terms, however, there was no denying that NATO's enlargement would take place at the expense of Russian interests. At best, the alliance's expansion into Eastern Europe would finally integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence. Alternatively, the inclusion of countries such as Poland and the Baltic states in the "West" would create a "cushion" against a Russian resurgence, should East-West tensions re-emerge at some point. It is also true that Moscow's financial and political predicament in the 1990s undermined any serious prospect of a proper response to what would otherwise be treated as an encroachment of the country's "near abroad." Nevertheless, Moscow tried to counterbalance its unavoidable retrenchment by developing, or bolstering, its existing security ties with countries on the fringes or the periphery of NATO, including Armenia, Syria, Iran, Greece and Cyprus (Ergün Olgun 1999).

To this end, the supply of advanced weaponry became a prominent policy tool. At the time, Russia had already deployed Scud-B missiles in Armenia (Howard 1997) and reportedly assisted Iran in developing 2,000 km range missiles, while the S-300 SAM missile system was exported to Syria in 1998 (Criss and Güner 1999, 368). Developed in the 1980s, the S-300 SAMs have the capacity to engage six targets simultaneously – flying as low as ten meters above the ground or as high as maximum aircraft ceilings. Moreover, it boasts an operational range of 150 km for fighter jets and 40 km for ballistic missiles (AFP 1997, 15 January). These characteristics imply that the S-300 can be classified as a strategic, as opposed to a tactical, weapon. Thus, beyond the obvious need to seek new markets for the financially struggling Russian armaments industry, Russian weaponry entailed a grand strategic logic that was hard to ignore. NATO members took notice. In late 1997, the Turkish General Staff prepared a report which accorded the S-300 system a central role in what was viewed in Ankara as an "offensive ring" engulfing the country's coastline, which hosted (national and NATO) military bases as well as sensitive infrastructure assets such as major ports and oil pipelines (IISS 1998).

Nevertheless, Russia's attempt to adjust its military posture to the sudden loss of its Soviet-era strategic depth was largely unsuccessful. Syria, probably the most committed Russian ally at the time, engaged in discussions with Israel over the future status of the Golan Heights (under Israeli control since the Six-Day War of 1967), while its influence in Lebanon gradually eroded, leading to the eventual withdrawal of stationed Syrian troops (Rabinowich 2009). Greece and Cyprus, meanwhile, undertook a major foreign and security policy adjustment vis-à-vis Turkey in the late 1990s, following a series of tense crises in the Aegean Sea (1996) and Cyprus (1998), with the latter directly related to the procurement of S-300 SAMs by the Cypriot government (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2012). The subsequent "Europeanization" of Greek-Turkish relations meant that Russian influence in Greece and Cyprus would erode. Despite the fact that Russian armaments were included in Greece's defence procurement programs until the late 1990s, Athens would become increasingly cautious in its dealings with Moscow, in an effort to

diffuse tensions in the Aegean Sea and accelerate the EU accession negotiations of the Republic of Cyprus.

Concurrently, Russia had a series of urgent issues to attend to, closer to home. The economic crisis of 1998 dealt a blow to the Russian economy, which was at the time recovering from the shock of the Communist collapse. Moscow defaulted on its debt and the Ruble was devalued, while the upheaval generated by Chechen separatists threatened the territorial integrity of the federation (Gilman 2010). Should there be any doubt left about Russia's incapacity to restore its pre-1990 geopolitical reach, the bombing of Serbia clarified the nature of the post-Cold War order by showcasing the conventional capability gap between the two former rivals. While Moscow had maintained a substantial nuclear deterrent (as emphasized repeatedly by the Russian leadership), the state of the country's air and naval fleets indicated that the country's capacity to project power in Europe was severely curtailed. In the following years, Moscow prioritized internal stability and then focused on deflecting NATO's attempts to expand into the Russian "near abroad." The Georgian and Ukrainian cases took precedence for Vladimir Putin, who began to perceive NATO expansion as detrimental, not just to Russian power projection, but to the security of the Russian Federation as well (Mydans 2004).

THE 2000s: RUSSIA RE-EMERGES AND SECURES ITS BACKYARD

In the 2000s, the Russian economy showed signs of recovery, bolstered by rising hydrocarbon prices, a major export commodity for Russia. Vladimir Putin had achieved to reassert effective control over the country, showcasing that internal stability was within reach, even at the cost of an iron, military and political, fist. The gradual economic recovery enabled the Russian armed forces to reinitiate investments in equipment and training, bolstering the Kremlin's confidence. Yet, the first half of the decade is characterised by a robust political momentum favouring the further expansion of the EU and NATO. The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan agitated Russian policy-makers. These events, which caught Moscow by surprise, were deemed to be little more than Western-backed "coups d'état" with the goal of creating a political and security web around Russia. A few years later, Georgia would become a battleground through which Moscow would signal its staunch opposition to the further expansion of the EU and, crucially, NATO in the region.

In 2003, the "Rose Revolution" brought Mikhail Saakashvili to power in Georgia. Saakashvili, a US-trained lawyer, was the lead figure of the peaceful demonstrations in Tbilisi against Shevardnadze's "Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG)" party efforts to force a fraudulent election result (Cooley and Mitchell 2009, 28). Protestors managed to secure Shevardnadze's resignation, and in January 2004, the newly elected Saakashvili promised to reassert Georgian control over the secessionist provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within his first term (Hewitt 2009, 19). For Georgia, reintegrating its separatist provinces was not simply a matter of national pride. The porous borders of these regions facilitated illicit trade and exacerbated asymmetrical threats, compromising the nation's security. The "frozen" conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, finally, undermined the Georgians' desire and effort to secure candidate status with both NATO and the European Union.

On 7 August 2008, after a series of militarized incidents that had taken place during the preceding days, the Georgian army launched a military operation aimed at reasserting control over South Ossetia. The following day, the Georgian government announced the capture of Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital, which was devastated by artillery fire (The Telegraph, 2008). In the meantime, however, Russia, South Ossetia's long-standing ally, had launched a full-scale counter-offensive against Georgian forces located in both the secessionist territory and other parts of Georgia. In the ensuing days, Russian forces succeeded not only in driving the Georgian military out of the breakaway province, but also in opening a second front in Georgia's other separatist province of Abkhazia.

Before their eventual withdrawal in late August, the approximately 20,000 Russian troops who had taken part in the operation had advanced deep into Georgian territory, inflicting heavy damage and casualties in the cities of Gori, Poti and Senaki. Assets of the Georgian military and civilian infrastructure were destroyed, including the railway connection between the eastern and western parts of the country. While figures remain unconfirmed, some 238 Georgians were killed, almost 1,500 were wounded and over 100,000 Georgians were displaced due to the conflict (Antonenko 2008, 24). In South Ossetia, Human Rights Watch puts the death toll in the lower hundreds, but the exact number of casualties has yet to be verified. European leaders were alarmed to see the American government stand idle as Russia undertook its first post-Cold War military offensive operation. It is indicative that the war ended with French mediation on 13 August 2008, with the mutually agreed "six point plan" establishing a ceasefire between Russia and Georgia.

Moscow's signalling of its growing discontent with NATO's expansion in the region was becoming stronger. While in 2008 NATO avoided providing Tbilisi with a "Membership Action Plan," the Council of the alliance affirmed that both Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become NATO members and that the parties would "now begin a period of intensive engagement with both at a high political level" (NATO 2008). Days before the escalation of 2008, moreover, the Georgian army, along with 1,000 U.S. troops and forces from Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Armenia, conducted an exercise ("Immediate Response 2008") in Georgia which aimed at increasing interoperability for NATO operations (U.S. Congress 2009, 3). Around the same time, some 8,000 Russian troops took part in the "Kavkaz 2008" exercise across the North Caucasus, including North Ossetia (IISS 2008). For at least the two years preceding 2008, the Russian North Caucasus military command and the Black Sea Fleet conducted exercises in the area under the scenario of repelling a Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers based in Georgia (U.S. Congress 2009, 3).

Relations between Russia and Ukraine had, meanwhile, deteriorated following the "Orange Revolution" of 2004, which brought to power the pro-Western government of Victor Yushchenko. Russia's response to what it considered to be a Western encroachment was decisive. Moscow temporarily cut off gas supplies in 2006 and increased its pressure through the Russian-leaning constituencies of Eastern Ukraine, in an effort to delay, if not derail, Ukraine's progress towards EU and NATO membership. Kiev responded by submitting a request for a NATO "Membership Action Plan" in January 2008 (IISS 2011). At the NATO 2008 summit in Bucharest, a number of allies, led by the United Kingdom and Poland, supported the provision of MAPs for both Georgia and Ukraine, though strong opposition spearheaded by Berlin blocked the motion, as the deepening of relations with Moscow was high on Germany's political agenda at the time (Asmus 2010, 119). The "loss," moreover, of Ukraine was detrimental to Russia's energy interests, as Ukraine had traditionally been part of

the route of Russian gas supplies to Europe. Moscow's position was further compromised by the May 2005 inauguration of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which transports Caspian Sea oil to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, bypassing Russia.

Finally, U.S.-Russian relations had also taken an irreversible turn for the worse. The Missile Defence plan sought to place missile assets near Russian borders, while the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008 exacerbated Russian fears of American indifference to "legitimate" Russian concerns. Putin's 2007 verbal attack in Munich against what was perceived to be a concerted Western effort to encroach on Russia was a first indication of a more assertive Russian stance henceforth (The Washington Post 2007, 12 February). Starting in early 2008, Russian statements regarding the status of the Crimean peninsula indicated that Moscow regarded the prospect of border change in the region under an increasingly positive prism (RFERL 2008, 24 August; Kommersant 2008, 4 July). The Ukrainian "front" would see a series of crises until the Crimean annexation and the outbreak of the civil war in the country a few years later, but Moscow's message had been made clear: NATO's expansion in the Russian "near abroad" was no longer acceptable. To this end, Moscow would initiate an extensive military upgrade and reorganization program, with the intention, according to James Stavrides, former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, to apply pressure on the non-NATO states around Russia (South 2017).

THE 2010s: SAILING FROM CRIMEA TO EUROPE

The Arab Spring movement, a revolutionary wave of protests and civil wars that swept the Arab world, captured Moscow's attention because a regime change could compromise well-established Russian interests. The Libyan leader, Muammar Gadhafi, visited Moscow in 2008, resuming close Russo-Libyan cooperation after a long hiatus. The Russian government appeared willing to erase an outstanding Libyan debt of more than four billion USD accrued during Soviet times in exchange for an extensive agreement on trade, armaments and infrastructure projects (Fasanotti 2016). Russian diplomatic support of Libya's secular, though oppressive, regime did not prevent the ouster of Gadhafi, following the NATO-backed military strikes of 2011 against his regime. The civil war in Syria transferred the "battlefield" to an area of prime concern to Moscow, threatening Russia's closest ally in the region: the Assad regime. In the run-up to, and during, the Syrian civil war, Russian diplomats supported Assad in the United Nations and other fora, deflecting decisions and policies deemed harmful to Damascus (Tilghman and Pawlyk 2015).

The West paid little attention to Russian concerns over the Arab Spring, partly because of a rather anaemic Russian military presence in the area. The chronic underinvestment in Russia's decaying Black Sea fleet, based in Crimea, had taken its toll on the country's power-projection capabilities (Korolkov 2015). In February 2013, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu emphasised that "the Mediterranean is at the core of all essential dangers to Russian national interests" (Inbar 2014). That year was a turning point for Russia's strategic thinking, with the decision to create a permanent Mediterranean Squadron comprised of ships from the Black Sea fleet (Felgenhauer 2013). The country's mid-term planning envisaged that by 2020, 132 billion US Dollars (almost a quarter of total projected outlays for the period) would be devoted to upgrading Russian maritime capabilities. By 2014, the 11,000 strong Black Sea fleet already

featured 6 Kilo class submarines and a surface contingent of 42 ships (Bodner 2014). A Mediterranean armada, integrated into the Black Sea fleet, quickly became visible through its activities in the Aegean Sea and adjacent areas. In addition to hosting Russia's sole aircraft carrier at times, the task force grew to include more than a dozen warships at the height of the Syrian conflagration (Haaretz 2018, 28 August).

In 2014, the assertion of Russian control over the Crimean peninsula consolidated a balance of capabilities in the Black Sea that seems particularly favourable for Moscow, taking into consideration that Sevastopol remains the "only naval base in the Black Sea capable of outfitting and dispatching new vessels and military hardware at a strategically significant level" (Gramer 2016). In force projection terms, however, the annexation of the Crimean peninsula would mean little if Russian access to the Mediterranean could be "filtered" by NATO through the Turkish-administered Bosphorus Straits. The Straits "bottleneck" remains strategically relevant, as disagreements between Russia and Turkey over the Montreux Treaty, which regulates passage through the Straits, have resurfaced. Control of the Straits has been a Russian concern for quite some time and for good reason. During the Crimean War (1853-1856), Sir James Graham, First Lord of the Admiralty, considered the Straits to be crucial towards thwarting Russian influence, as they could restrain the Russian navy from accessing the Mediterranean waters (Badem 2010, 46-98).

The aforementioned stark geopolitical reality could solely be addressed to the extent that Russia maintained a robust naval force at all times in Mediterranean waters. But logistical and operational support of a Russian fleet would necessitate berthing agreements with littoral states. This has proven to be a challenging task during the post-Cold War period. The Montenegrin government appears to have quietly deflected Moscow's overtures in 2013 aimed at either establishing a naval base at the Adriatic port of Bar or increasing the scope of support provided to Russian fleet units at the country's ports (IBNA 2013, 20 December). Rumours that Cyprus could host a Russian naval base surface regularly, only to be denied by the Cypriot government (Al-Monitor 2015, 3 March). After relevant bilateral agreements – and without special privileges – Russian ships make use of the strategically located port of Limassol on a frequent basis, while Russian aircraft can use Cypriot airports in emergencies and during missions of humanitarian nature (Cyprus Mail 2015, 21 January). For both Montenegro and Cyprus, alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions has increasingly constituted a core policy pillar, with Montenegro acceding to NATO in 2016, despite deep domestic divisions on the issue (Balkan Insight 2016).

The procurement of large, power-projecting ships could partly compensate for Russia's inability to secure bases and long-term logistical support arrangements. The only Russian aircraft carrier, the Soviet-era *Admiral Kuznetsov*, has frequented Mediterranean waters, but its high operating costs and obsolete technology (The Moscow Times 2014, 29 September) render its presence more symbolic than substantial. The Russian navy tried to rectify this shortcoming by acquiring two new helicopter carriers from France. The attempted procurement of the Mistral-class carriers, amphibious assault ships that can accommodate a load of 16 attack helicopters and up to 900 combat soldiers (Jerusalem Post 2014, 19 April), became a polarizing issue among NATO members. The French sale was met with strong resistance from allies, culminating in the capitulation of Paris and a bitter diplomatic standoff between France and Russia. France finally cancelled the order and the ships were eventually acquired by Egypt (Defence Industry Daily 2016, 21 September).

Vladimir Putin's sudden decision to engage the Russian armed forces in the Syrian civil war should therefore be understood under this prism. Russia's geographic, economic and technological limitations, exacerbated by a well-established NATO presence in the Mediterranean, compelled Moscow to seek a permanent presence on NATO's south-eastern flank. Between the initial stages of the Syrian conflagration and Russia's involvement in the Syrian quagmire, Moscow had decided to bolster its naval presence in and around Europe, initially securing the Crimean peninsula. In the absence of a proper aircraft carrier fleet and extensive berthing rights, Moscow realised it urgently needed a permanent base in order to stabilise its presence in a crucial maritime area: the axis connecting the Black Sea and the Suez Canal. The Russian naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus, hitherto of minor importance for Russian naval operations, was to become a strategic asset under the novel Russian doctrine. The ongoing Syrian turmoil provided the requisite pretext, with the Russian army swiftly deploying and Vladimir Putin asserting that "The collapse of Syria's official authorities will only mobilize terrorists" (Stent 2016).

If naval power projection was problematic for Russia, air power projection was almost non-existent before the 2010s. The Latakia electronic listening (SIGINT) station was set up during the Cold War but was not designed to host a force of Russian aircraft. Russia's air-power projection across the Mediterranean had thus remained a complicated issue, as Russian fighter jets would have to either cross Southern European (and thus NATO) countries, or fly through the Caspian Sea, Iran and Iraq, over states whose geopolitical orientation has been far from consistent. Moreover, some of the Russian fighter jets, such as the Su-25s, do not possess an air-refuelling capability (Mercouris 2015).

Moscow's Syrian foray, a move that surprised Western analysts (Stent 2016), was aimed at resolving the challenges of projecting naval and air power in the Mediterranean. The Russian intervention in Syria was accompanied, in 2015, by a commitment of military resources without precedent for post-Cold War Russia. Moscow's military surge included ground attack aircraft and helicopters, naval vessels and marine infantry, with Moscow deploying long-range S-300 missiles and advanced fighter jets to its Syrian bases. Russia's conduct in Syria, overall, indicated that Moscow aimed at establishing a permanent presence that would engender an adverse effect on NATO's freedom of manoeuvre in the area. Perhaps more importantly, the Russian strategy could seek to gradually assert air superiority over critical parts of the Mediterranean, thereby creating "pockets of disruption" within, or in proximity to, NATO allies.

The West is gradually realizing the importance of these developments. In 2015, *The Financial Times* admitted that "Russia has not had any sizeable presence in the Mediterranean since the end of the cold war. And a lack of investment until recently in its decaying Black Sea fleet, had led strategic military planners to overlook the entire theatre as a possible source of concern when it came to Moscow" (21 October). Alexander Vershbow, NATO's Deputy Secretary General, articulates the alliance's adjusted perception of Russia in a clear manner when he characterizes Russia's presence south of the Bosphorus as "disruptive," adding that NATO needs to "think about the broader consequences of this build up in the Eastern Mediterranean and the capacity of these airbases (Financial Times 2015, 21 October)."

The Mediterranean, however, is not the only relevant case study. The gradual militarization of Kaliningrad is similarly creating a "pocket of disruption" in a critical area for the defence of Central and Eastern Europe. The Kaliningrad oblast, situated between Lithuania and Poland was annexed by Russia at the end of WWII and functions, in essence, as a forward operating

base behind NATO's front lines. In recent years, the Russian military has bolstered the capabilities of Russian forces in the enclave through, most notably, the deployment of the nuclear-capable Iskander ballistic missiles. The corresponding threat levels to the Baltic countries and Poland are elevated, as a Russian missile strike from Kaliningrad would leave a brief reaction window to NATO (Stavridis 2018). In both cases discussed, the combination of robust offensive (SAMs/fighter jets) and defensive (S-300/400) capabilities could create an anti-access, area-denial problem, with the prospect of establishing a no-fly zone over a critical location (particularly in the event of a crisis).

Anti-access and area denial refer to war fighting strategies aimed at "preventing an opponent from operating military forces near, into or within a contested region" (Tangredi 2013). Usually combined as Anti-Access/Area Denial or abbreviated as A2/AD, similar tactics have been employed in historical case studies such as the Falklands, after they were briefly captured by Argentina (Shunk 2018). While denying access to enemy forces may be a common goal among combatants, A2/AD strategies are particularly tailored to asymmetrical power relationships. In other words, a weaker party could adopt an A2/AD strategy in order to avoid a confrontation with a more powerful opponent, who may be the defender or the attacker. In this manner, the more powerful actor will theoretically be unable to bring its full force to bear in the operational theatre or maximise its control of the contested area. A2/AD strategies have come to the spotlight in recent years due to their potential applicability in East Asia, and specifically in a hypothetical crisis situation during which China decides to annex Taiwan by force. In such a scenario, China would conceivably be able to keep American forces outside the operational theatre through attrition tactics, instead of actually confronting American air and naval assets.

BOLSTERING RUSSIAN DETERRENCE

Technological advancements achieved in recent years by the Russian defence industry could not only offset some of the geographical and logistical challenges aforementioned, but also ensure that conventional deterrence is maintained in Europe, irrespective of NATO's ballistic missile defence status. Russia's naval doctrine can now ensure that targets are acquired from the safety of the Black Sea or even Russia's extensive riverine system. The use of, for the first time, Sea Launched Cruise Missiles (SLCM) in the Syrian conflict, launched from the Caspian Sea, was aimed at sending a clear signal regarding the capacity of the Russian navy to target hostile ships and land targets at great distance, thus projecting power without running the risk of engagement with hostile forces (Fielding 2015). The value of conventional precision-guided, long-range weapons has been demonstrated in numerous conflicts since 1990, as their use is not limited to the extreme escalation levels associated with nuclear warfare. Their development is also indicative of possible Russian countermeasures against the anti-ballistic missile system NATO is gradually establishing and deploying in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean.

Moreover, the upgraded Buyan corvettes, which have a displacement of less than 1,000 tons at full load, could sail and launch their cruise missiles from Russian rivers such as the Volga or the Don. The supersonic sea-launched Kalibr missiles, therefore, with a range of approximately 1,500 km, pose a substantial challenge to NATO, threatening assets such as the

NATO base in Incirlik, Turkey. This development indicates that Moscow is in a position to challenge the alliance's primacy in long-range, precision-guided strike capabilities. Admiral Aleksandr Vitko, the commander of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, has stated that cruise missile-equipped ships will be permanently sailing in the Mediterranean (Blank 2016). Russian surveillance and electronic warfare assets, meanwhile, can now be regularly deployed close to listening stations in Turkey and the British RAF base in Cyprus (Akrotiri), further compromising NATO's advantage in intelligence collection and electronic warfare. Moscow has, finally, announced that its Kirov class battle cruisers will be equipped with a naval variant of the S-400 by 2022 (Majumdar 2016), placing Russia in a position to protect its forces in Europe with its own air defence umbrella. These developments imply that Moscow's deterrence is bolstered, as NATO allies in Europe find themselves within striking distance of Russian cruise and ballistic missiles.

Russia continues, at the same time, to pursue anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons as a means to reduce NATO's military effectiveness (Coates 2018), while concurrently upgrading its nuclear arsenal (including long-range delivery systems). In recent years, the Russian armaments industry has reclaimed its capacity to develop cutting-edge products such as the Su-57 fighter jet and the T-14 Armata battle tank. It was reported that during the testing of the new S-500 system, the missile struck a target at a distance of 481 kilometres, rendering it the most advanced surface-to-air missile ever produced, with significant implications for European security when the system becomes operational in 2020 (Macias 2018). Overall, Russia aims at maintaining a credible deterrent at the conventional and nuclear levels while at the same time rendering itself capable of disrupting critical parts of NATO in Europe.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that a degree of uncertainty with regards to Russian intentions will always be present. Surprise, after all, is usually a privilege accorded to the challenger, not the defender of the status quo. This chapter suggested that, far from following a concrete plan with clearly delineated goals, Russia's grand strategy allows for a substantial degree of flexibility. Maintaining credible conventional and nuclear deterrents while attaining the capacity to disrupt NATO operations in various flashpoints across (or in proximity to) Europe enables Moscow to gradually erode NATO's red lines without risking an all-out war with the United States and its allies. The most important implication of Russia's grand strategic doctrine is that low-level, hybrid tactics could trigger a security crisis in such a flashpoint, enabling Russia to capitalize on its local advantage and change the status quo.

The excessive emphasis placed, in this regard, on non-military hybrid tactics may prove to be misleading. It has to be noted that the seizure of Crimea was catalytic in bringing the hybrid warfare concept to the spotlight, as the Russian endeavour constituted a highly successful, and for this reason alarming, showcase of the Russian ability to surprise and confuse. The artful use, in particular, of mainstream and social media for propaganda and disinformation purposes, as well as the level of integration of irregular forces (mercenaries and local militias) with regular elements of the Russian army, caught policy planners by surprise. Nevertheless, the Crimean operation would have probably failed, had Russia chosen to rely purely on low level tactics. Indeed, the Crimean annexation begun with a disinformation campaign but the situation

swiftly escalated, with masked gunmen storming government buildings and a full invasion of the peninsula taking place thereafter, making use of Russia's airborne, naval infantry, and motor rifle brigades (RAND 2017).

One could say, though, that Europe and NATO have been somewhat eclectic when deciding on what should be the "lessons learned" from the Crimean case study. In the months and years following the forced annexation of the peninsula, the domain of communication became a central pillar of NATO and EU strategic thinking. Initiatives such as the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga and the EU anti-propaganda unit were conceived as potential countermeasures to Russian narratives rendering Western nations vulnerable to political manipulation by the Kremlin. Such initiatives are, without a doubt, useful. A number of European analysts, however, proceeded to downplay the importance of conventional armaments and training in the novel environment of hybrid warfare. This line of thinking is anything but constructive and could in fact prove to be dangerous for European security. Warfare is a continuum, ranging from information and disinformation campaigns to nuclear warfare. Preparing to face a fragment of this continuum is, in essence, an invitation to escalate in the eyes of the opposing force.

Furthermore, there is a danger of misreading Russian strategic thinking on the basis of a single case study characterized by a unique set of circumstances. The population of Crimea is predominantly Russian and therefore amenable to Russian media influence. Meanwhile, the geographic proximity of the peninsula to Russia and the presence of Russian military personnel in Crimea rendered the blending of regular and irregular tactics not only feasible, but also highly appropriate for the particular operational environment. There was simply no need for a direct confrontation with the Ukrainian army through the mobilization of conventional forces. It is unlikely, however, that this scenario can be repeated elsewhere. Russian operations in Syria, for instance, were of a more "traditional" nature, indicating that Russian strategic culture has not transformed but rather evolved, with conventional operations remaining at the centre of Russian strategic culture. Meanwhile, the conventional capability gap between Russia and Europe is widening, as most NATO members are reluctant to commit resources to defence. An excessive reliance placed by Europe on niche fields like strategic communications could, in this regard, undermine European capabilities further by diverting scant resources from crucial conventional areas.

A few countries such as Estonia and Sweden (the latter despite not being a NATO member) appeared to understand the need to prepare and train their forces across the spectrum of conventional and irregular warfare, while the alliance bolstered its rapid reaction capabilities through the forward deployment of NATO assets in Europe. Signalling its intention to retain control of the Mediterranean, the alliance carried out in October 2015 an ambitious exercise, with approximately 36,000 troops, 140 aircraft and 60 ships pooled from over 30 countries, some of which, like Australia, are not NATO members (Villarejo 2015). The *TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2015* exercise, hosted by Italy, Spain and Portugal, officially tested the alliance's response mechanisms under a hypothetical scenario of instability in the Horn of Africa. The message, however, was intended to reach Moscow.

In the absence of a strong and reliable EU security and defence apparatus, NATO has retained its role as the cornerstone of European security. On 20 October 2015, the American Navy announced that a NATO vessel stationed at the Spanish naval base of Rota had successfully intercepted a ballistic missile (for the first time in a European operational theatre) as part of a missile defence demonstration. The announcement came two weeks after the

surprise launch of 26 cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea by Russian warships against Syrian targets. In 2016, Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary general of NATO, announced that the alliance is planning to expand its presence in the Mediterranean by transforming the *ACTIVE ENDEAVOUR* operation “into a broader security operation (NATO 2016).” NATO’s biggest exercise since the end of the Cold War, *TRIDENT JUNCTURE 2018*, was hosted by Norway in October 2018, involving 50 thousand troops from all NATO allies, plus partners Finland and Sweden. The manoeuvres stretched from the North Atlantic to the Baltic Sea and lasted for two weeks, showcasing NATO’s capacity to mobilise substantial assets and plan for different contingencies in Europe (NATO 2018).

The viability of a U.S. long-term commitment in Europe should be questioned, however. On multiple occasions after the end of the Cold War, American policymakers have emphasized Europe’s capacity and responsibility to guarantee its own security and safeguard the stability of its neighbourhood. The U.S. “pivot to Asia,” initiated by the Obama administration, sent a strong signal regarding the future of American grand strategy and Europe, presaging Washington’s gradual disengagement from the continent, accelerated by the Isolationist Trump administration. The waning of American dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources could strengthen the momentum of the U.S. decoupling, taking into account the increasing importance of the Asia Pacific as the focal point of American interests. The 6th Fleet features, for instance, a single command ship and four destroyers permanently assigned to the force, all based in Spain, with only rotational presence in the Mediterranean from ships passing through on the way to, or when coming back from, the Middle East (Altman 2016, 73). Nevertheless, there is always at least one *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer in the area as part of NATO’s anti-ballistic defence umbrella.

Finally, the EU’s recent financial crisis has rendered European leaderships reluctant to increase defence spending and assume additional security-related tasks. Britain’s role, moreover, in the provision of security for Europe after Brexit remains an enigma. Overall, the acute resourcing problem of European security undermines the long-term prospects for an effective response to status quo challenges posed by Russia. The drastic reduction of European defence spending after the end of the Cold War and the commitment of NATO assets away from Europe (NATO ships take part in the *OCEAN SHIELD* operation in the Indian Ocean, for example) are creating an increasingly perceptible capability vacuum. In the short term, the United States could transfer combat ships and perhaps aircraft from other operational theatres, though this strategic “band aid” would only partially alleviate the alliance’s credibility problem. In the long term, Europe will have to increase its defence outlays and bolster its capabilities in order to maintain a continental balance of power.

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