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Strategic Posture and the Implications for
the United States and NATO**

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AFA Breakfast Series Talk, 25 Jun 15

Bill Chambers, IDA, and Bridge Colby, CNAS

This paper summarizes the content of a presentation for subject event. The presentation is to be done jointly, in partnership with Elbridge Colby of the Center for New American Security. Bill Chambers begins with a summary of Russia's actions and words, what we can thus conclude about Russia's strategy, and what that means for the United States and NATO, outlined below. Bridge Colby will follow with his presentation and discuss some of the particular dangers and potential scenarios which may arise as a result of Russia's current strategy.

As keen observers of current geopolitics and national security issues, this audience has likely watched with interest the behavior of Russia on the global stage during the past year. The title of our presentation, then, may be inherently intuitive. To many, the strategy and posture of Russia is obvious. What may not be so obvious is what to do about it. . .

But before we get to implications, we should first be clear regarding the nature of Russian behavior. Indeed, the term "resurgent" applied to Russia may only characterize an artificially narrow US perception; Russia's neighbors would likely term Russia's recent behavior differently. I'm reminded of several conversations I had during the past 10 years with senior members of the military of these neighbors, our newer NATO allies. . .

However, in presenting the case as to what Russia's strategy or strategic posture might be, it's useful to catalog the recent evidence. First, a brief list of Russia's actions:

- annexation of Crimea, illegal by any international standard
- forcible incursion and occupation by Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, now engaged in ongoing conflict with Ukrainian forces
- retaliatory sanctions versus the West and Western leaders
- large combined-arms exercises on NATO's borders, and finding ways to avoid the Vienna Document notification requirement for such exercises
- incursions of sovereign airspace around the globe, in violation of international standards, by Russian aircraft (by late Oct 14, three times more than in 2013, according to counts made by the European Leadership Network)
- continued economic coercion as energy exporter
- frequent public statements of their status as a nuclear power and brandishing of nuclear weapons--in rhetoric and in demonstrations of military capability--which senior US and NATO leaders have termed irresponsible
- in comparison to nascent US and NATO steps to modernize, a widespread ongoing modernization of existing Russian strategic weapon systems--ICBMs, ballistic-missile

submarines, bombers and cruise missiles--and development programs for new systems such as a new mobile ICBM, a new MIRVed heavy ICBM, a new ballistic missile-carrying submarine, a new stealthy heavy bomber. . .and potentially new, more accurate low-yield warheads (though some observers question whether resources will ultimately allow what President Vladimir Putin describes as 70% of all weapons modernized by 2020)

- demonstrated integration of and operationalizing nuclear weapons employment during major combined-arms exercises . . . and a doctrine which prepares for the need to employ nuclear weapons early to “de-escalate” a burgeoning crisis, “to compensate for conventional force weakness.” (Paul Bernstein, in *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*)
- continued sustainment of thousands of tactical nuclear weapons. . .and opacity of same
- violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (formally declared last August by the State Department)
- agreements with Iran to support their nuclear power capability and to sell advanced surface-to-air weapon systems, timed in the midst of P5 + 1 negotiations with Iran
- leveraging bilateral links with other nations for influence, coercion or manipulation, both inside and outside of NATO (e.g., Iran, Syria, Greece, Hungary), during ongoing crises
- cyber intrusions of US government networks
- efforts to leverage Russian segments of population inside neighboring NATO states

Many of us are well aware these actions have a very different explanation from the perspective of Russian leaders. The pursuit of national interests is always viewed through the lens of the beholder, and depends on where one sits. Bridge and I have been in forums during the past year where we heard the Russian version of ongoing events in Eastern Europe. And I commend the audience to peruse the remarks made before the UN General Assembly this past September 27th by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for just such a narrative (regarding Russia’s role in the world, Lavrov said, “Russia is promoting a positive and unifying agenda”). . .or the interview with President Putin in the Italian daily, *Il Corriere della Sera* on 7 June 2015 (Putin: “As for some countries’ concerns about Russia’s possible aggressive actions, I think that only an insane person and only in a dream can imagine that Russia would suddenly attack NATO”). But, if actions and narratives alone don’t tell a story, perhaps public statements offer further evidence:

- Russia’s new military doctrine document of December 2014 identifies a global array of threats, including the US and NATO (and some of their weapon systems) as top military risks, and indicates an increased or re-emphasized reliance on nuclear weapons at the strategic and operational levels;
- Regarding the annexation of Crimea, President Putin in March 2015 said, “We were ready to do this (put nuclear forces on alert). . . . It was a frank and open position. And that is why I think no one was in the mood to start a world war”;

- In August of last year, Putin said, “I want to remind you that Russia is one of the leading (or most powerful) nuclear powers (or nations). This is a reality, not just words... its best not to mess with us.”
- President Putin privately threatened to invade Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, according to a record of a conversation with his Ukrainian counterpart:
 - “If I wanted, in two days I could have Russian troops not only in Kyiv, but also in Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw and Bucharest,” Mr. Putin allegedly told President Petro Poroshenko of Ukraine, reported *Sddeustche Zeitung*, the German newspaper (as reported in *The Telegraph*, 18 Sep 2014)
- According to Mikhail Vanin, Russian Ambassador to Denmark (March 2015), “If Denmark joins the American-led missile defense shield... then Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles.”
- And, continued accusations regarding US Ballistic Missile Defense in Europe deliberately avoid reference to US and NATO commitments to transparency and assurance that such systems are not being deployed to counter Russian systems.

Such actions and words, then, all add up to depict a troubling trend, characterized by a *realpolitik* pursuit of self-interest; centralized consolidation of power and wealth; continued aggressiveness abroad; repression and silencing of opposing voices at home; apparent overwhelming domestic support; articulation of a world view diametrically opposite that of the West (Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, perhaps the leader who knows Putin best, told President Obama by telephone last spring . . .that after recently speaking with Mr. Putin she was not sure he was in touch with reality. “In another world,” she said. *New York Times*, 2 March 2014), all of which seem to demonstrate a carefully elaborated path to re-gain status and influence, to correct grievances, and fulfill ambitions (as described by a Russian expert at a conference in Washington DC in late January).

Based on this (and other) evidence, Russia appears to be following a strategy or assuming a strategic posture to re-gain stature on the world stage, increase manipulative influence in what they term their “near abroad,” build strategic depth or what they might consider a “buffer zone,” divide and weaken NATO, prevent further NATO enlargement, and strengthen alliances and links to states opposed to the West, . . .and to pursue such strategic ends by rattling sabers, which include, at the core, nuclear weapons.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on 27 May 15 in a speech at CSIS describes the Alliance’s concern: “Russia’s recent use of nuclear rhetoric, exercises and operations are deeply troubling. . . . Russia’s nuclear saber-rattling is unjustified, destabilizing, and dangerous.” Regarding Russia’s announcement to base modern nuclear-capable missile systems in Kaliningrad and Russia’s claim of its right to deploy nuclear forces in Crimea, the Secretary General said, “This will fundamentally change the balance of security in Europe.”

Other astute observers of Russian behavior, the National Institute for Public Policy, summarize the situation: “Russia’s statements on nuclear policy, its official doctrine, its extensive across-the-board strategic modernization programs, its direct nuclear threats against others, its unprecedented level of Cold War-type strategic exercises, and its violation of nuclear arms control agreements all suggest a troubling and dangerous move toward a more aggressive overall nuclear posture for the foreseeable future. The implications of these actions, coupled with Russia’s increasingly belligerent behavior on the world stage and willingness to use military force, threaten the very foundations of peace and stability . . .”

Moreover, a telling conclusion is the second sentence of NATO’s Wales Summit Declaration: “Russia’s aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.” (5 September 14 NATO Press Release)

What, then, are the military implications for the US and NATO? The current military commander in Europe, General Phil Breedlove, is beginning to answer that question. During recent media engagements at the Pentagon and during testimony before Congress, Gen Breedlove said the U.S. needs to increase its deterrence as Mr. Putin modernizes and builds up the capabilities of his military and displays “ambitious strategic intent.” Gen Breedlove went on: “We also know Putin only responds to strength and seeks opportunities in weakness.” And, “We must strengthen our deterrence in order to manage his opportunistic confidence.” Gen Breedlove concluded: “The forces in Europe over the last 20 years have been sized for a situation where we were looking at Russia as a partner . . . what we see now is that Russia has demonstrated it is not a partner.” (*Wall Street Journal*, 30 April 15)

Having been part of executing or having watched the majority of the reductions of force levels in Europe up close during the past 25 years, I can say with some authority that those reductions, using any measure, have been drastic, . . .and they continue. The US now has only 7 fighter squadrons stationed in Europe. We have one dedicated brigade’s worth of Army power . . . and no Army operational headquarters assigned to Europe.

Most telling is that the actual local balance of forces--by any measure--along the eastern border of the Alliance is clearly not in NATO’s favor.

The implications, then, for the US and NATO are many, and US and NATO leaders have exhorted the following necessary actions:

- a reconsideration of force presence, basing, and posture in Europe (including a plan for prepositioning heavy military equipment in the Baltic nations and possibly Poland and others) . . .including the logistics mechanisms to move NATO power east
- visible assurance steps by US and other NATO forces in eastern ally states, such as the recent Dragoon march, and other NATO actions to continue to execute the European Reassurance Initiative, including increased rotational presence

- enhancing the NATO Response Force (Secretary Carter's outline of US contributions this week is another step)
- progress on member nations reaching the 2% goal for defense spending
- deliberate strategic signaling, such as recent B-2 and B-52 deployments to Europe
- support for Ukraine as a partner, in several dimensions
- nation-specific support for Baltics and southeastern perimeter allies, such as with Air Policing and via participation in BALTOPS and Saber Strike
- affirmation of the importance of NATO and the importance of NATO as a nuclear alliance (especially in light of re-balance to Pacific)
- re-assessment and strengthening of NATO and US policies, plans, and postures in light of the need to operationally deter and assure on a day-to-day basis
- re-invigorated capacity building and joint training in the eastern portion of NATO

Other military implications which can be considered:

- continued rationalization and strengthening of NATO's nuclear mission: the readiness and modernization of the dual-capable aircraft fleet and the stewardship of US nuclear weapons
- continued re-examination of contributions to and expansion of members who are contributing to the Alliance's deterrence mission
- advocacy for the required resources for the B61 Life Extension Program to keep it on track, budget-cycle to budget-cycle
- continued focus on development and production of the F-35 and its Block 4 spiral, which will contain the software for nuclear capability
- NATO's military commands and headquarters putting emphasis on the next level of detail for NATO's deliberate plans
- strong bonds between USSTRATCOM and SHAPE planning staffs
- NATO emphasis on the training required for DCA forces--ranges, exercises, C2, etc.
- presence of some CONUS-based US long-range strike platforms rotating to Europe, and continued sustainment of the standby bases and infrastructure assigned to support
- continued building of eastern allies' capacity and capabilities; e.g., Baltic nations' air capability, counter Information Warfare, etc.
- continued advocacy for and focus on the plans for US Ballistic Missile Defense capabilities in Europe, for assurance purposes (US presence on Allied soil)
- underscore the overdue need for the continued re-capitalization of US and Allied strategic forces: Ohio-class replacement, GBSD, LRS-B, LRSO, NC3, UK Trident CASD, French air and missile platforms. . .and their role in NATO deterrence and assurance posture

- integration of NATO niche capabilities; e.g., NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, US Integrated Air and Missile Defense command and control, etc.
- bolstered ISR coverage of Russian military exercises and modernization programs
- war games to examine the scenarios that might play out in the regions on the eastern border of NATO

Beyond these considerations, we should ask ourselves, “Are policies and plans for countering Russian behavior and preventing potential escalation coherent and effective, and are capabilities being developed to mitigate this risk? Is fresh thinking in order?” (Such questions Secretary Carter seems to be asking, and answering, this week during his targeted engagements in Europe. Can we now put fresh policies, plans, and capabilities in place to fulfill his intent?)

In today’s volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, we can safely say that America needs partners . . . and our allies in Europe need to sense the US as partner perhaps now more than any other time in the past 25 years. Our NATO allies have been our closest and most reliable partners, and we continue to depend on them every day. While casting our eye on the importance of the Asia-Pacific, and re-balancing as necessary, we cannot afford to take our eye off of Europe nor our focus on the transatlantic bond.

That bond was uniquely illustrated by remarks delivered by President Barack Obama in Tallinn this past September. An excerpt of that speech deserves special highlighting. Speaking directly to the people of Estonia, in Estonia, the President said: “During the long Soviet occupation, the great Estonian poet, Marie Under, wrote a poem in which she cried to the world: ‘Who’ll come to help? Right here, at present, now!’ And I say to the people of Estonia and the people of the Baltics, today we are bound by our treaty Alliance. We have a solemn duty to each other. Article 5 is crystal clear: An attack on one is an attack on all. So if, in such a moment, you ever ask again, “who will come to help,” you’ll know the answer -- the NATO Alliance, including the Armed Forces of the United States of America, ‘right here, [at] present, now!’ We’ll be here for Estonia. We will be here for Latvia. We will be here for Lithuania. You lost your independence once before. With NATO, you will never lose it again.”

Military leaders have the solemn duty to now make sure the US and NATO have the deterrent and warfighting capability to back up that commitment made by the Commander in Chief.

I defer now to Bridge, to continue the discussion. . .

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