

<b>REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE</b>				<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
<p>The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to the Department of Defense, Executive Service Directorate (0704-0188). Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p> <p><b>PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ORGANIZATION.</b></p>					
<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 01-05-2018		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Research		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> SEP 2017-NOV2017	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> NATO Deterrence in 2018				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> COL Noah Christian Cloud				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution A: Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> <p>The 2007 cyberattack against Estonia, the 2008 Georgia conflict, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2014 Eastern Ukrainian intervention, the ongoing Syrian conflict and the most recent alleged meddling in the U.S. and other foreign government elections have put the world on notice that Russia remains an influential power. Russia is asserting this power globally to achieve its national interests. This assertiveness has rekindled uncertainty in Europe and the U.S. reminiscent of the Cold War era. President Donald Trump's recent remarks regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member's financial contributions has further stoked uncertainty regarding NATO's solidarity. Furthermore, during his first address to NATO, President Trump did not explicitly reaffirm the treaty provision that an attack against one ally is an attack against all.<sup>1</sup> For NATO to deter further Russian aggression, a clear and coherent deterrence strategy is required—strengthened by solidarity and informed by how Russia is using its instruments of national power (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) to achieve its interests.</p>					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b>					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b> 15	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Director, Writing Center
<b>a. REP ORT</b> U	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> U	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> U			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b> 401-841-6499

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NATO Deterrence in 2018

Noah Christian Cloud

## **Introduction**

The 2007 cyberattack against Estonia, the 2008 Georgia conflict, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2014 Eastern Ukrainian intervention, the ongoing Syrian conflict and the most recent alleged meddling in the U.S. and other foreign government elections have put the world on notice that Russia remains an influential power. Russia is asserting this power globally to achieve its national interests. This assertiveness has rekindled uncertainty in Europe and the U.S. reminiscent of the Cold War era. President Donald Trump's recent remarks regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member's financial contributions has further stoked uncertainty regarding NATO's solidarity. Furthermore, during his first address to NATO, President Trump did not explicitly reaffirm the treaty provision that an attack against one ally is an attack against all.<sup>2</sup> For NATO to deter further Russian aggression, a clear and coherent deterrence strategy is required—strengthened by solidarity and informed by how Russia is using its instruments of national power (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) to achieve its interests.

## **Deterrence Strategy Shortfalls**

Recent Russian aggression along its periphery and in Syria may suggest that the current NATO deterrence strategy is not adequate. Over the last ten years, most NATO nations have been divesting military capability and spending less than two percent of GDP on defense while Russia has been aggressively investing in military modernization.<sup>3</sup> Although U.S. strategic nuclear deterrence is present in Europe, these approaches are less credible due to their age and Russia's ability to counter the threat.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, "Europe's political disunity, lack of leadership, and absence of appetite for confrontation with Russia, allow the Kremlin to exploit its

military capabilities along its periphery.”<sup>5</sup> These military shortfalls are compounded by similar economic and diplomatic challenges.

Similarly, economic sanctions appear anemic in deterring Russian aggression as well. To date, economic sanctions “have not changed [Russian President] Putin’s behavior abroad and have helped him consolidate power at home.”<sup>6</sup> By creating a narrative that foreign governments are at fault for Russia’s economic problems, Putin has retained favor with the Russian people.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, wealthy Russian oligarchs targeted by sanctions have become more reliant upon the Kremlin, vice global markets for economic support, further enabling Putin’s control.<sup>8</sup> Diplomatic efforts have realized some progress and are ongoing; however, there has been no resolution of the underlying problems associated with Russia’s recent aggression.<sup>9</sup> These military, economic, and diplomatic challenges highlight some of the shortcomings in the application of the collective national power, within NATO and Europe, to deter Russia.

### **Russia’s National Interests**

According to the European Council on Foreign Relations, “If we want a win over Russia—or to win Russia over—we should try to understand what Russia stands for, and why. Misconceptions can lead to misguided responses, and then whether we ‘win’ or not will come down to chance.”<sup>10</sup> Effective deterrence requires more than chance—understanding Russia’s desires is important. Ultimately, Russia wants to control territory that lies between Europe and Russia, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—being able to control and limit Western influence within this territory is paramount to Russia.<sup>11</sup> This desire for alignment of countries and control runs counter to the post-Cold War liberal order where countries can choose freely how they wish to align themselves.<sup>12</sup> Chris Chivvis assesses, “Putin would like to be able to carry out interventions to support his political and economic interest in

countries neighboring Russia, but without concern for the consequences for Russia's relations with Europe or America."<sup>13</sup> Although unacceptable to the West, Russia will likely continue to utilize its elements of national power to achieve its interests unless NATO changes the status quo deterrence strategy.

### **How Russia Is Using National Power to Pursue Its Interests**

Russia is highly calculating in how it projects its military power and prefers to operate in the "grey zone." Grey zone tactics prioritize the use of non-kinetic military means such as cyber and influence operations along with economic pressure and disinformation to disrupt an enemy..<sup>14</sup> Grey zone tactics make Russian involvement less clear to fragment opposition from the international community..<sup>15</sup> Although not yet necessary, as Russian domestic unrest increases due to economic sanctions imposed by the West, a Putin-led Russia may increasingly seek conflict with the West or with its neighbors to divert pressure..<sup>16</sup> According to Johnathan Marcus, "Russia's newfound assertiveness is not to be confused with a desire to launch a military attack westward."<sup>17</sup> The reality is that the Russian military is not capable of holding ground in a prolonged conflict, "a sustained fight would probably end disastrously for Moscow."<sup>18</sup> Russia is more likely to use the elements of its national power to achieve its interests while avoiding direct conflict with, or evoking a military response from, NATO and other western nations; however, it is capable of using its military decisively. Russia's use of information power demonstrates how it can be destructive without eliciting a military response..<sup>19</sup>

Russia is using information power to achieve its goal of destabilizing the existing world order to its advantage. Recently, Putin noted that "Russia's approaches to conflict are to be based on intellectual superiority. They will be asymmetrical and less costly."<sup>20</sup> Russia has a formidable cyberattack capability along with a lower dependence on networks, making it one of the most

dangerous cyber powers in the world..<sup>21</sup> Comparatively, the U.S. and Europe have a higher reliance on networks for critical infrastructure and less capable cyber defense capabilities..<sup>22</sup> In 2007 and 2008, Russia used its cyber capability against Estonia, Georgia, and the U.S. to achieve its national interests..<sup>23</sup> Russia's infiltration of U.S. intelligence networks in 2008 was conducted to steal information needed to support its direct military attack against Georgia..<sup>24</sup> Russia's cyber capabilities is one aspect of its information power being used for regional influence and control.

Additionally, Russia leverages the global connectedness of the media to spread disinformation. This effort undermines society's exchange of credible information, as described by information warfare expert Ben O'Loughlin, who stated, "It is not simply that Russia's 'hybrid war' model might be destabilizing audiences' sense of certainty about what is happening in world affairs. It is that such a strategy undermines the very fundamentals of information and credibility that informed debate are supposed to rest upon.."..<sup>25</sup> Russia alleged meddling in the U.S. presidential election and propagation of "fake news" demonstrate this approach..<sup>26</sup> These efforts are pernicious, as they create internal dissension and distrust in the U.S. regarding the election process which leads to doubt about the legitimacy of elected government. Using information power to foster populism via election meddling and "fake news" within European countries and the U.S. may favor Russia as it seeks to get others to focus inward instead of on Russia's pursuit of regional hegemony..<sup>27</sup>

Along with information power, Russia leverages its economic power to destabilize and re-shape the world order. Moscow gains influence within certain central and eastern European economies and political systems due to these countries' reliance on Russian oil and gas..<sup>28</sup> According to Martin Vladimirov and Ruslan Stefanov, Russia captured Serbia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Hungary and Slovakia politically through economic means..<sup>29</sup> and that,

[Moscow is] preserving and expanding its dominance of the oil and gas markets, exploiting governance loopholes to manipulate top-level decision-making, and capturing regulatory institutions to prevent market liberalization and competition. Secondly, it has become abundantly clear that Russia is not interested only in business. In fact, it seeks to use its considerable and growing resources to undermine Europe's established liberal-democratic consensus..<sup>30</sup>

These dubious practices transfer undue influence over political matters within the European Union (EU) to the Russian government. The EU should seek unity with regard to policy and utilizing economic power to counter Russia's influence as a source of conflict..<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, several EU countries continue to purchase much of their oil and gas from Russia, thus the threat of Russian meddling in political affairs to destabilize the western established liberal world order remains a threat.

Russia is skilled at using diplomacy to achieve its national interests as evidenced by Russia's recent challenge to EU solidarity. Following the Brexit vote, Russia used diplomatic engagement with economically dependent countries, such as Slovakia, Greece, and Hungary, to encourage at least one dissenting vote against continuing EU imposed economic sanctions..<sup>32</sup> Russia specifically targeted Slovakia's president for diplomatic engagement due to Slovakia holding the EU rotating presidency at the time..<sup>33</sup> More recently, Moscow signaled its increasing divide with Washington over economic sanctions by ordering a reduction of U.S. mission staff within Russia..<sup>34</sup> Both these efforts demonstrate acumen in utilizing diplomatic means in the pursuit of national interests.

### **Solidarity and Ideas for a New Deterrence Strategy**

Since Russia's aim is to tear down the post-Cold War world order to exercise control over its neighbors, one should consider the importance of western solidarity in maintaining the

status quo world order. Using the instruments of national power to deter Russia and to maintain the status quo requires a united front of western nations and an adherence to deterrence strategy goals. An effective deterrence strategy requires “combining two competing goals: countering an enemy and avoiding war. The basic concept is quite simple: an enemy will not strike if it knows the defender can defeat the attack or can inflict unacceptable damage in retaliation.”<sup>35</sup> This deterrence strategy requires NATO’s use of all the elements of national power, beginning with military power.

Military power is perhaps the most critical aspect of a deterrence strategy in Europe, but it is not the sheer presence of alliance power alone that deters. Signaling complete solidarity via Article V is the vital component to counter Russia’s desire to “divide and conquer.” According to James Kirchick, Russia desires to exploit solidarity to its advantage.

Putin is implacably hostile to the United States, blaming it for bringing down the Soviet empire and humiliating Russia. Because the European Union and NATO – both of which have welcomed countries once dominated by Russia – serve as obstacles to the reassertion of Russian hegemony, Moscow’s long-term strategy is to undermine and ultimately break these institutions from within, thereby neutralizing the concert of nations that has traditionally been necessary to restrain Russian expansion on the Continent. The Kremlin’s ideal outcome is the Finlandization of the West, whereby Europe and America abandon their principles, sacrifice their allies and accommodate Kremlin prerogatives without Russia having to dispatch a single soldier abroad..<sup>36</sup>

The recent comments from President Trump stating that NATO nations should meet their agreed upon contributions to military spending while failing to verbally affirm the U.S. commitment to Article 5 of the NATO mutual defense treaty is an example where solidarity is unclear..<sup>37</sup> Although the intended result may be a stronger NATO by encouraging countries to increase spending on military power, the statement gives Russia room to exploit gaps in solidarity.



In addition to solidarity within the military alliance, a capable NATO fighting force is necessary for deterrence. NATO is comprised of 29 alliance members with various military capabilities, troop strengths, and readiness postures. The ability to offer a credible deterrence requires that all alliance members are interoperable and decisive such that they provide a rapid and coordinated response to Russian aggression.<sup>38</sup> To do so requires alliance members' militaries to train together more regularly to reduce the time and bureaucracy required to mount an effective defense. The recent forward positioning of NATO defensive forces along the eastern flank of Europe for enhanced training opportunities is a positive move in the right direction.<sup>39</sup>

Although an improvement, these forward positioned forces are inadequate to deter Russia militarily. The force posture needs to be robust enough to stop "a quick Russian occupation of the Baltic states followed by a pause in fighting and a Russian nuclear threat to divide and freeze the alliance. That path to limited victory might tempt Russian President Vladimir Putin."<sup>40</sup> To deter this threat, armor, air defense and artillery capability gaps need to be filled and the ability to re-enforce and sustain forces quickly must be improved.<sup>41</sup> LTG Ben Hodges, US Army Europe Commander, highlights three key aspects to mounting a credible force against Russia: the speed of recognizing enemy activity, the speed of decision making to act as an alliance, and the speed of assembly to move and mass forces.

These three activities rely heavily on good intelligence, streamlined bureaucracy for decision making and improved logistics infrastructure to support the moving and massing of armored forces. The alliance has made great strides forward in improving readiness and deterrence, but much more still needs to be done.<sup>42</sup>

Nuclear deterrence continues to be a vital part of the total NATO military deterrence strategy, but more attention is needed. Collectively, NATO maintains a comparable sized nuclear

arsenal to that of Russia; however, focusing an increased level of resources, training, and modernization is critical in signaling to Russia that NATO can respond outside of the conventional domain, if required. Of concern is Russia's recent use of nuclear rhetoric. According to the *NATO Review* magazine, "Russia has been successfully pursuing a policy of 'aggressive sanctuarization' with a significant nuclear component, under which it does not hesitate to use conventional force and nuclear rhetoric to deter external involvement countering its aggressive behavior in its immediate neighborhood or beyond."<sup>43</sup> As Russia continues to define its version of the world order by asserting influence over its regional neighbors, it becomes more important for NATO to show equal resolve. A clear NATO policy that contains a robust set of conventional capabilities along with clear messaging, unity, clear warnings, and a commitment to use nuclear weapons as a last resort provides credibility.<sup>44</sup>

However, it is important to acknowledge there are risks associated with an increased military build-up whether conventional or nuclear. The primary risk being the triggering of an arms race with Russia. To mitigate this risk, diplomacy along with an information campaign must signal that these efforts are strictly defensive in nature.

Next to military power, economic power is most important and persuasive in deterring Russia's pursuit of its national interests. EU member states, along with the U.S., should collectively apply economic sanctions, when appropriate, and encourage solidarity. If not, the economic impact has less of a deterrent effect and exposes a crack in alliance solidarity. Felix Chang highlights an example of the importance of solidarity.

European companies, particularly German ones, gave Moscow hope. They were never keen on the economic sanctions against Russia. From the start, they lobbied German Chancellor Angela Merkel to water them down. After they were imposed in 2014, German direct investment into Russia evaporated. But only a year later, German companies returned, investing \$1.8 billion into

Russia. Last year, they invested another \$2.1 billion, more than they had in the year before economic sanctions were imposed. Such continued investments have encouraged Moscow to question the strength of Western resolve.<sup>45</sup>

German non-compliance with sanctions undercuts the collective impact and deterrent effect of sanctions and presents a lack of EU solidarity. Although there is evidence that sanctions have had a negative impact on Russia in the short term, a lack of solidarity, an improving global economy, and Russia's ability to adapt, make the long-term impact less clear.<sup>46</sup> There is a significant amount of evidence that the Kremlin is convinced that the U.S. is intent upon regime change in Russia.<sup>47</sup> If prolonged sanctions create internal power struggles within the Kremlin, it is possible that they could produce unintended negative consequences. To manage both potential outcomes more effectively, U.S. diplomacy will likely continue to play a pivotal role.

Russia, as shown earlier, is using informational power to conduct cyberattacks and proliferate "fake news" to undermine effective communication and democratic institutions within NATO. To better recognize and deter this type of "grey zone" activity, NATO should consider expanding the Article V definition of an attack against an alliance member in its NATO treaty. Expanding the nature of what constitutes an attack, to include cyber and information, would enable alliance members to collectively respond to destabilizing efforts from Russia in non-military ways.<sup>48</sup> An expanded definition should incentivize increased cyber collaboration within NATO to enhance deterrence as the capacity to detect, defend against, and respond to cyber-attacks increases. This element of national power can be ambiguous and is sometimes slow and difficult to arbitrate; however, this should not stop NATO from moving toward the goal of expanding Article V.

Diplomacy should be coupled with informational and all other elements of national power to ensure open and active communication with Russia to reduce the risk of

misunderstanding or misreading any situation. Diplomacy with Russia is especially vital regarding any changes in Article V policy, force posture, or NATO membership. These diplomatic efforts can be risky, so they will need to be carefully coordinated amongst alliance members and without publicity. Just as important as diplomacy with Russia to avoid misunderstandings is diplomacy within NATO to ensure it remains less predictable and more relaxed..<sup>49</sup>

Solidarity within NATO is vital to deterring Russia's pursuit for regional control. "Russia has mounted an extensive, aggressive, and multi-platform attempt to use its military and the threat of force as instruments of coercive diplomacy, intended to divide, distract and deter Europe from challenging Russia's activities in its immediate neighborhood."<sup>50</sup> In this environment it is important for NATO and the EU to exercise diplomacy internally to ensure convincing unity and a capacity to respond as such..<sup>51</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The current NATO deterrence strategy has proven inadequate in deterring Russian aggression. Russia is using its national power to change the post-Cold War world order to one that gives Russia regional hegemony. This is incongruent with the ideals and norms fostered by the United States, the EU and NATO. If NATO maintains the status quo, it is likely that Russia will continue to operate in the "grey zone" to wreak havoc in and amongst NATO nations to achieve Russian interests. Status quo from NATO may even embolden Russia's will to push the boundaries and accept more risk, given their success in Crimea and Georgia and their military modernization efforts. One possibility that is not unimaginable is that Russia may underestimate NATO's resolve and try to build upon its recent success by invading a neighboring country or a Baltic state. To undo a scenario like this would test the resolve of NATO and all of Europe. It

would likely take a significant amount of time to adjudicate and could cost thousands of lives in a military contest. A signal of strength and solidarity should reduce the risk that Russia over-estimates their strength and under-estimates NATO's resolve. Furthermore, the time for change is now, before a crisis occurs—providing “money at the time of crisis fails to deter war.”<sup>52</sup>

To effectively deter further Russian aggression, NATO must change the status quo and employ an updated deterrence strategy. This strategy must employ all the elements of national power with greater solidarity. Key elements of this improved strategy, in order of priority, are: increasing the size and capabilities of forward deployed forces along the eastern flank of Europe, updating the nuclear deterrence arsenal, increased solidarity in applying sanctions against Russia within the EU and the U.S., expanding the definition of what constitutes an attack against NATO to include cyber and information attacks, engaging Russia's neighbors regarding their membership in NATO, and the continual use of diplomacy among the EU, NATO, U.S. and Russian nations. The use of diplomacy is especially important in mitigating risks leading to an arms race or increased conflict due to miscommunication.

Finally, one should not ignore the extent to which Russia's Armed Forces have modernized and how they compare to NATO forces. For example, how does the Abrams tank compare to the latest Russian Armada tank? Does this impact NATO's deterrence? This type of analysis would be useful in understanding how much investment is needed to create parity or superiority against Russian weaponry. To this point, Secretary Mattis emphasized recently to the Armed Services Committee that a “failure to modernize our military risks leaving us with a force that could dominate the last war, but be irrelevant to tomorrow's security.”

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