



NATO Parliamentary Assembly

POLITICAL COMMITTEE

**RUSSIA:
FROM PARTNER TO COMPETITOR**

GENERAL REPORT

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. NATO-Russia relations are currently at their lowest since the end of the Cold War. Moscow's provocative stance and actions towards NATO, and aggressive actions against Ukraine, Georgia and other NATO partners, undermine the stability of the whole Euro-Atlantic area. Following up on previous reports of the Political Committee on Russia and NATO-Russia relations, this short paper focuses on security policy issues that are relevant for NATO and NATO Allies and for the development of the future NATO-Russia relationship. The report argues that NATO Allies need to remain committed to a strong deterrence posture and stand up to Russia's continuing provocations and aggressions against NATO partner countries, particularly Ukraine and Georgia. To that end, implementation of the decisions taken at the Warsaw Summit is important. At the same time, NATO Allies need to complement deterrence with periodic, focused and meaningful dialogue with Russia.

II. NATO'S TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

2. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea put an abrupt end to 25 years of Allied efforts to build a genuine strategic partnership with the Eurasian great power. Already in 2007, in his Munich Security Conference speech that was dubbed "back to the Cold War", President Vladimir Putin accused the West, and the United States in particular, of pursuing "double standards" and of interfering in the national affairs of other countries, including by attempting "regime change" (BBC News). The NATO Secretary General at that time, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, described the speech as "disappointing and not helpful". Russia's recent actions have also included the use of force against its neighbours and other forms of intimidation against Allies and partners, such as the continuous occupation of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia. The Kremlin's dangerous behaviour and provocations against Allies and its multiple violations of international norms have left NATO no choice but to consider the prospect of aggressive Russian action against an Alliance member as a potential threat, and to adopt measured, proportionate responses. NATO's refocus on its core task of collective defence represents a significant change after its focus on crisis management operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan. This policy change was initiated at the 2014 Wales Summit and was confirmed at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016.

3. In Warsaw, Allies accused Moscow of violating the NATO-Russia Founding Act and breaching international order based upon the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. At that Summit Allied Heads of State and Government also took important decisions to strengthen deterrence and defence, including concrete commitments to reassure eastern Allies. They agreed to enhance NATO's military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance, with four battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, on a rotational basis. The Summit also endorsed an *enhanced forward presence* for NATO's south-eastern flank, in the Black Sea region. All these measures bolster the deterrence and defence posture of the Alliance, increase situational awareness, and thus strengthen regional security. Allies also agreed to further develop cooperation with NATO partners, including Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. In addition, Allies declared Initial Operational Capability of the NATO Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system and reaffirmed their commitment to develop further stages of the architecture in Europe. Reflecting increasing concern about Russia's propaganda and cyber activities aimed at influencing domestic politics in NATO member and partner countries, NATO Heads of State and Government also recognised cyberspace as an operational domain, joining land, air and sea. In addition, NATO Allies committed to continue to enhance NATO's resilience and to develop individual and collective capacity to resist any form of armed attack.

4. It is worth noting that the measures agreed at the Warsaw Summit are defensive in nature, proportionate and consistent with the Alliance's legal and political commitments, and demonstrate

its respect for the rules-based European security architecture. Moreover, Allies agreed that deterrence and defence should be coupled with periodic, focused and meaningful dialogue with Russia in order to increase transparency and predictability, thus avoiding misunderstanding, miscalculation, and unintended escalation.

NATO-Russia Relations after the Warsaw Summit

5. There has been good progress in implementing the Warsaw decision to reassure eastern Allies; the four battalions that are being deployed in Poland and the Baltic states will be in place in 2017. NATO's bolstered presence in south-eastern Europe will be built around a Romanian framework brigade, and supplemented by steps to strengthen the readiness and interoperability of air and maritime forces in the Black Sea region. The Alliance has also made progress in expanding its counterterrorism and cyber-defence capabilities and achieved a breakthrough (on paper) in relations with the European Union (EU). This cooperation holds considerable promise, also with regard to countering Russian disinformation campaigns. As an example, your Rapporteur wants to point out that the European Council set up, in 2015, the East StratCom Task Force within the European External Action Service (EEAS) to combat such activities.

6. In the meantime, the Kremlin has continued its provocative course against the Alliance and against NATO partner countries. In particular, member states' awareness of the challenge posed by Russian cyber activities has increased significantly. As officials of the US Department of Homeland Security testified to the Intelligence Committee of the US Senate in June 2017, election systems in 21 US states had been targeted by hackers linked to Russian authorities. At the time of writing, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation is investigating alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US Presidential elections as are several US Congressional Committees. Russia is also accused of meddling in the French Presidential and national elections in 2017. There are also reports indicating Moscow's involvement in cyber activities against EU institutions. There is strong concern that Russian hackers may also plan to influence the 2017 elections in several NATO member countries, including Germany. Moscow has repeatedly rejected these accusations. Ewan Lawson, Senior Research Fellow for Military Influence at RUSI (Royal United Services Institute), noted that Russia is conducting large scale cyber-espionage, sabotage and subversion activities against the Western countries. Russia does not even particularly try to hide its hostile cyberactivity, which is in itself a message to the West. Apart from using state resources, Russia also employs or encourages independent hackers or "hacktivists", thereby ensuring plausible deniability for the Russian government.

7. Another cause for concern is Russia's continuing military build-up at NATO's eastern borders and the number of large military exercises in the vicinity. In recent years, Moscow has built an extensive anti-access/area denial (A2AD) zone including the High North in Murmansk, the Kola Peninsula, Kaliningrad and the Black Sea as well as in the eastern Mediterranean. This could potentially impede and complicate reinforcements to eastern NATO Allies and NATO operations in these areas. Moscow has announced further measures to enhance its capabilities close to NATO's borders. These include deployment of advanced S-400 missile systems, K-300P Bastion coastal defence system and nuclear-capable Iskander-M Short Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) to Kaliningrad. Furthermore, in September and October 2016 respectively, Russia deployed two S-400 missile systems in the Leningrad Oblast (region) near the Finnish border and two Buyan-class corvettes to Kaliningrad, which are reportedly equipped with nuclear-capable Kalibr missile systems. Moreover, Russia has been strengthening its military capabilities in the Arctic by deploying new weapons platforms and improving the sensor capabilities of its submarine fleet. In addition, Russia maintains more than 9,000 troops, 2,600 FSB Border Guard and heavy offensive armament in Georgia's occupied territories. Both forward deployed units in Georgia's occupied regions and Russian units based in annexed Crimea are integral units of Russia's Southern Military District (SMD). They routinely participate in the military trainings and exercises of the SMD.



8. In parallel with the build-up of forces in the Western regions, Russia has increased its military activities near NATO borders significantly. Of particular concern are large-scale, unannounced snap exercises. In the Western Military District compounds, military units have already conducted more than 50 combat readiness checks since the beginning of 2017. Russia also continues to provoke dangerous military incidents, among other things by violating Allied airspace.

9. In Syria, Russia's military intervention in September 2015 complicated the fight against Daesh¹ and has also led to an increase of refugees fleeing the country, many of them to Europe. Moscow's intervention prevented the regime of President Bashar al-Assad from collapsing; its military assistance was instrumental in shifting the balance of power between the authoritarian Syrian regime and the opposition forces in the formers' favour. The fall of Aleppo in December 2016 represented a critical turning point in the Syrian civil war. At the same time, Moscow has undermined US-led attempts to broker a political transition at the end of 2015. Moscow advanced its own framework to settle the ongoing Syrian conflict at the international meeting on the cessation of hostilities in Syria in Astana on 23 and 24 January 2017. In late February 2017, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have held the Assad regime accountable for chemical weapons attacks against civilians. The Security Council resolution was based on the findings of the United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

¹ Arabic acronym of the terrorist organisation "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria"

10. Despite Russia's provocative actions, NATO has remained open for dialogue. Three meetings of the NRC were held in 2016 and NATO Allies continue to use this and other platforms to share their concerns and remind Russia of its international obligations, including with respect to Ukraine. However, the dialogue has so far not delivered any tangible result. Therefore, the NATO-Russia relationship remains tense - which has serious negative implications for security in the Euro-Atlantic region and beyond.

11. Moscow pursues a determined and long-term plan to undermine NATO and destabilise Europe, with the ultimate goal of creating a new security architecture in Europe with Russia as the dominant player. Under Vladimir Putin Russia has been asserting its national interests at the expense of neighbouring states, particularly Georgia and Ukraine, as well as NATO Allies.

12. The Kremlin is waging what it understands to be a strategic counter-offensive against 25 years of Western encroachment on Russia and its interests, as James Sherr, Associate Fellow at Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Programme, briefed the Committee during the 2016 NATO PA Annual Session in Istanbul. President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly accused the West, and the United States in particular, of pursuing "double standards" and of interfering in the national affairs of other countries, including of attempting "regime change". He has also called for the restoration of "historic Russia" and its borders, as he did in a speech to the Russian Federal Assembly in March 2014. Other senior Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Serguey Lavrov, went even further. At a speech at the Valdai Club in October 2014 the Minister said that "Moldova and the Baltic states should consider events in Ukraine and draw conclusions". Your Rapporteur wants to emphasise that this view of NATO, and particularly of NATO's Open-Door policy, is a deliberate misinterpretation of the facts. On the contrary, since the London Summit of 1990, the Alliance has consistently worked to build a cooperative relationship with Russia on areas of mutual interest. NATO reached out to Russia with a series of partnership initiatives, culminating in the foundation of the NATO-Russia Council in 2002. No other country has such a privileged relationship with NATO. With regard to interfering in national affairs of other countries and NATO enlargement it must be noted that it was the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that applied for NATO membership after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. They applied because it was their own free choice – and this happened through their own national democratic processes, and after conducting the required reforms. This was a very different process to the incorporation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact after the Second World War - which was carried out under conditions of military occupation, one-party dictatorship and the violent suppression of dissent.

13. With regard to "double standards", your Rapporteur wants to note that it is Russia's imperial ambitions and actions that constitute a brutal breach of the international order established under the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia has its strategy based on appalling and brutal interference with the sovereignty of States, while the Allies have only been reacting to the threats and have not yet developed the thorough containment strategy which is needed.

14. Russia's latest foreign-policy concept blames "the West" for imposing its points of view on others and describes the "struggle for dominance in shaping the key principles of the future international system" as "a key trend" in world affairs. As far as NATO's "Open Door" and Partnership policies are concerned nothing could be further from the truth – as your Rapporteur has outlined above. The present situation is potentially more dangerous than the block confrontation that existed during the Cold War. This is due to the fact that today Russia is a revisionist power and Russia's leaders are used to a high-risk culture that regards the consensual system of Western policy-making as weakness.

III. RUSSIA'S MILITARY CHALLENGE

15. President Vladimir Putin has made the modernisation of the Russian military forces a priority to show that Russia is a key international actor again. The modernisation programme has allowed Russia to make significant progress in the process of tailoring its military capabilities to the modern security environment, particularly focusing on the development of rapid reaction special forces and advanced electronic warfare capabilities. A significant part of the new military equipment represents upgrades or replacement of aging systems. However, other new technologies could indeed destabilise the political-military situation in the Euro-Atlantic area.

16. While a direct Russian military threat to the Alliance seems unlikely at the moment, Russia's current military posture presents a significant security challenge. Russia continues to strengthen its military capabilities on NATO's eastern flank. It has been bolstering its military presence in Kaliningrad by deploying nuclear-capable Iskander-M SRBMs. As outlined above, Moscow is also planning to enhance its A2AD capabilities in Kaliningrad and significantly diminish NATO's ability to defend its Eastern Allies, particularly Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. The consolidated military presence Moscow has developed in Crimea - its A2AD architecture, 40,000 troops deployed on and around the peninsula and a modernised Black Sea Fleet - could jeopardise NATO's operational capabilities in this region. Moscow is also enhancing its military footprint in the Arctic, reviving a network of military outposts from which Russia can control the Northern Sea Route, maintain visibility and affect area denial at key chokepoints. In addition, Russia continues to increase the intensity of its military activities near NATO's border without providing an appropriate level of transparency. Of particular concern is the large-scale military exercise ZAPAD 2017, scheduled to take place in September 2017. It will involve almost 100,000 troops from Russia and Belarus, posing a high risk of miscalculation, and will take place at the same time as military drills by Western forces in Sweden.

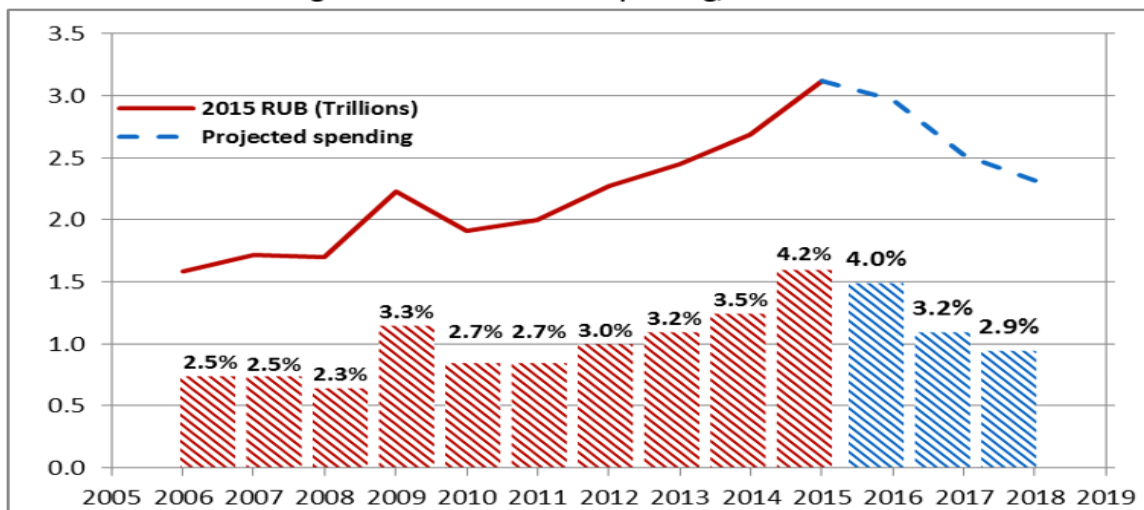
17. The modernisation of the Russian military is in itself a logical step for a country that sees itself as a great power. However, in combination with unannounced large-scale snap exercises close to NATO's borders and the aggressive rhetoric, this is reason for concern. The decision to establish an enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in NATO's eastern part, as well as a tailored forward presence on the Black Sea, was an appropriate, and measured response. Even with the additional battle groups deployed, the military balance on NATO's eastern flank is tilted heavily in favour of Russia. During the March 2017 visit of the Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships (PCNP) to the Baltic States, officials estimated that Russia has deployed almost 300,000 military personnel close to the borders of the Baltic States, while the number of NATO troops totals about 80,000. The Allies should therefore consider increasing NATO's footprint in Poland, the Baltic countries and in Romania and deploy additional forces, also to bolster cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia.

18. Additional measures by Allies to strengthen NATO's footprint in the east will also be necessary as Russia continues its military modernisation and build-up. Low energy prices and the international sanctions imposed following its aggressions against Ukraine appear to have dented the increase in Russia's defence spending. At the moment of writing, there are conflicting estimates of Russia's defence expenditures. However, the recently released *National Security Threat Assessment* by the State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania estimates that Russian defence spending is unlikely to be reduced in 2017.

Top 20 defence budgets for 2015 and 2016 (in millions US dollars). For this study, values based on constant 2016 US dollars.

	2015		2016
1United States	615,746	1United States	622,035
2China	180,523	2China	191,752
3United Kingdom	53,532	3United Kingdom	53,811
4Russian Federation	51,844 ↑4	India	50,678
5Saudi Arabia	50,531	5Saudi Arabia	48,686
6India	46,645	↓6 Russian Federation	48,446
7France	44,244	7France	44,349
8Japan	42,192	8Japan	41,686
9Germany	35,935	9Germany	35,754
10Korea, South	32,275	10Korea, South	33,477
Top 10 Total	1,153,467	Top 10 Total	1,170,674
% Global Spending	74%	% Global Spending	75%
11Australia	27,445	11Australia	26,842
12Brazil	24,439	↑12Italy	23,055

Figure 1: Russian Defence Spending, Real and %GDP



19. Maintaining unity among member countries is as crucial as maintaining the credibility of NATO. NATO member countries must therefore continue to implement the decisions taken at Warsaw, and in particular the pledge to increase defence spending. Moreover, further progress is possible and indeed necessary to strengthen the Alliance by, among other things, adapting the NATO decision-making process to today’s security environment and needs. More specifically, Allied member states should grant the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) expanded authority. At the same time, it is crucial to continue and indeed increase military-to-military talks with the Russian Federation to avoid misunderstandings and miscalculations.

20. Moreover, since its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, Russia has frequently used a language that suggests a readiness to use nuclear weapons against NATO Allies and partners. In this respect, Russia has made its nuclear policy intentionally vague, reserving the right to use tactical nuclear weapons in the case of a conventional attack that “threatens the very existence” of the Russian state. This emphasis on the potential use of nuclear weapons, particularly the discussion of a “de-escalatory” use of nuclear weapons to force NATO to negotiate a political solution that allows Russia to hold on to its territorial gains in the event of an invasion, is worrying.

IV. RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AND ALLIED RESILIENCE

21. Russian activities to influence public opinion in NATO member and partner countries are a cause for considerable concern. Officials from Western intelligence agencies have repeatedly warned that Russia is using the culture of free speech in the democracies of NATO member countries to disinform and mislead target audiences. As the PCNP was briefed by Janis Sarts, Director of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (COE STRATCOM) during a visit in March 2017, the Russian information strategy carefully maps vulnerabilities in NATO member countries and creates an “information fog” by spreading false narratives and conspiracy theories. This approach aims to put Western value systems in question as it conveys a narrative to the public where truth does not exist. Thus, with targeted disinformation and propaganda the Kremlin tries to undermine public confidence in governments and institutions and disrupt our democratic systems.

22. Russia’s cyber warfare capabilities play an important part in Russia’s current military playbook. Russia’s updated national security strategy and military doctrine emphasises the importance of hybrid capabilities for protecting Russian national interests, including in what it considers to be its sphere of privileged interest in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. According to reports, Moscow has already used its offensive cyber capabilities against a number of Eastern European countries, among other things by disrupting the functions of key governmental institutions and objects of strategic importance, such as power plants.

23. The Russian attempts to destabilise our democratic systems compound the challenges that NATO Allies are facing. In the age of the internet, where fake news can be disseminated quickly around the globe, the impact of such techniques is much more profound. This has led to the destruction of the traditional information hierarchy, with the result that governments and mainstream media lose credibility, as Janis Sarts briefed members of the Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships.

24. As a result, political uncertainty has increased; this is reflected, in part, by populist parties on the extreme ends of the political spectrum that put forward xenophobic and Eurosceptic narratives. This constitutes a major threat to the democratic systems of NATO member states and to the cohesion of the EU. The rise of populist forces in Alliance member states could impact future defence budgets and national foreign policy priorities. The Kremlin is likely to use intimidation and misinformation to exploit diverging national policies of NATO member states on important topics with detrimental consequences for the cohesion of the Alliance.

25. Therefore, NATO and NATO member states as well as partners need to strengthen their resilience in the face of Russian disinformation. NATO as an organisation can play a role here, but only a limited one as this is first and foremost a task for national governments. Increased cooperation between NATO and the EU is also necessary and the Joint Declaration that was signed at the Warsaw Summit is a step in the right direction. In the meantime, all NATO and EU countries have agreed to over 40 proposals for concrete cooperation in a number of areas including cyber defence and strengthening the resilience of partners. NATO Allies should make this a priority and provide sufficient resources to translate those proposals into concrete policies.

26. Moreover, NATO Allies could consider expanding the remit of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, whose task is currently limited to analysis in the operational area. Finally, your Rapporteur greatly welcomes the fact that the President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Paolo Alli, has made it a priority of his presidency to focus on education and communication about NATO. His proposal to create a working group tasked with developing new communication tools for use in the parliaments and schools of NATO member countries should be supported by all parliaments and governments of the Alliance.

V. THE FIGHT AGAINST DAESH

27. There is significant activity of Daesh and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Although it is difficult to pin down their exact number it is estimated that since 2014 between 2,500 and 3,000 Russian citizens, mainly immigrants from the North Caucasus, have joined Daesh to fight in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, over the past three years, Daesh recruited approximately 4,000 foreign fighters from Central Asia, including a significant number of Russian migrant workers. Russian governmental sources report that radical Islamic groups in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, some of them affiliated with Daesh, conduct recruiting activities in Russia.

28. Although, in the past, Moscow repeatedly emphasised its willingness to work together in the fight against international terrorist groups, very little, if anything, has been achieved. Concerning Syria, the view of the Kremlin deviates significantly from that of NATO Allies. From Moscow's perspective, one cannot fight both Daesh and the regime in Damascus. Russia wants to keep Assad in power at any cost, and thus keep its influence in the region. In Afghanistan, Russia may be helping to supply Taliban insurgents as General Curtis Scaparrotti, SACEUR, informed the Armed Services Committee of the US Senate on 23 March 2017. Moscow has denied allegations that it provides aid to the insurgents in Afghanistan.

29. While the Kremlin has repeatedly claimed that its military intervention in Syria targets Daesh, the vast majority of the Russian attacks were aimed at groups opposing the Assad regime and not at the extremist group. Russia's indiscriminate bombing in Syria has also worsened the humanitarian situation of the civilian population and further aggravated the refugee crisis. Although President Putin publicly announced in mid-March 2016 that he would withdraw his troops, the Russian military presence and the air strikes continued throughout 2016 and beyond. Joint Russian-Assad regime air strikes in Aleppo have also specifically targeted medical facilities.

30. Therefore, contrary to Moscow's public declaration, the primary reason for Russia's military campaign in Syria was to support the Assad regime. A secondary objective of Moscow's moves in Syria was probably also to force NATO Allies and the West to talk with Russia and break its isolation since its aggression against Ukraine. The military engagement in Syria has also provided Moscow with an excellent opportunity to show off its new military prowess, to re-establish itself as a key player in the region and to increase its standing in the world. In addition, Russia seeks to expand its naval presence in the Mediterranean, which according to Admiral Vladimir Masorin, Commander in Chief of the Russian Navy, is important for the Black Sea fleet.

31. As cooperation with Russia in the fight against terrorist organisations like Daesh is necessary and desirable, the situation on the ground does not give much reason for optimism. In Syria, Russia is working together with Iran to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power. In fact, the Kremlin undermines the image of the West and Western intentions, thereby also challenging cooperation between regional governments and NATO Allies. For now, Russia's military deployment in Syria has created an effective A2AD bubble, and the presence of several air forces operating in the same confined airspace increases the risk of accidents or misunderstandings, which can easily escalate. Moreover, Moscow's support for the Syrian regime is unlikely to bolster regional stability and could aggravate the security challenges for NATO's southern flank. While Russia is also concerned about Islamist terrorist groups, its main concern is to keep terrorists out of Russia. There have even been reports that Russia has facilitated the transfer of Islamist radicals from the North Caucasus region to join Daesh and other terror groups in Syria.

32. Moscow's strategy of indiscriminate air strikes in Syria has contributed to further radicalisation and increased motivation to join terrorist groups. By contrast, NATO Allies and NATO member states recognise that the terrorist organisation cannot be countered or defeated solely

with military means. The root causes of Daesh's emergence, namely instability and religious extremism, must be tackled in the long run. NATO Allies and Partner countries therefore strive to promote economic and political systems that prevent the (re-) emergence of terrorist organisations and thus further stability and cooperation in the region. The Russian government rejects the argument that the rise of Daesh and other terrorist organisations has primarily been fuelled by oppressive regimes and political and economic marginalisation but blames the West for causing regional instability, by removing Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Ghaddafi in Libya. Moreover, Moscow seeks to block what it considers Western, primarily US, attempts to establish hegemony throughout the region.

33. Thus, while the tactical objectives of NATO and Russia in the fight against Daesh overlap, there is a fundamental divergence on the strategic level. Moscow's actions emphasise narrow security aspects, building strong bilateral ties with the security establishments of Middle Eastern governments but ignoring the bigger picture. This approach not only impedes international efforts led by NATO Allies, it also risks causing instability in the future. However, Russia's military intervention in Syria has undoubtedly had a decisive effect and gained the Kremlin a place at the negotiating table as regards the future of the country. Russia can be a spoiler and use its presence on the ground and its influence to block the plans of other actors. The international community, and NATO Allies, therefore need to work with Moscow to deconflict the situation on the ground in order to avoid a possible military confrontation. While NATO as an organisation is not directly involved in fighting Daesh, it should continue to provide assistance to the international coalition fighting the terror group. NATO and Allies must also continue to support all efforts to find a negotiated political solution to the war in Syria.

VI. NATO PARTNERS

34. Russia's approach to "zones of influence" implies a "zero-sum" perception where the increasing influence of Russia on NATO, or perhaps only increasing diplomatic and economic relationships of countries with one of them, would mean a decreasing "influence" of the other. This was evident when the Kremlin decided to intervene by force in Ukraine. Such an approach conflicts with fundamental principles of international order such as self-determination and sovereignty, NATO policies, and the "Open Door" policy in particular. In a briefing to the Sub-Committee on Transatlantic Relations during a visit to the United Kingdom in April 2017, James Sherr argued that Russia has traditionally perceived itself as a "land empire" with its own unique civilisation. This empire does not have clear borders and its policies have been both offensive and defensive at the same time. Russia's security culture emphasises the concepts of the control of its periphery or "near abroad", spheres of influence, client states and buffer zones.

35. In terms of security and zones of influence, Russia differentiates between the "Russian world" (Russskiy Mir), the historic West, and those countries that fall in the intermediate grey zone. Moscow's policies towards the countries of the "near abroad" aim to stifle any attempt of the countries in the grey zone to move closer to the West. To that end, the Kremlin uses all possible means of soft and hard power to persuade the countries in the grey zone to behave accordingly or face the consequences. Russia's priority zone is the entire area encompassing the Caucasus, the greater Black Sea region and the eastern Mediterranean. Within this zone, Ukraine is the most important country for Russia. An independent, stable and prosperous Ukraine is important for regional security. Therefore, NATO Allies, and indeed the international community, need to continue and intensify their political and financial support for the country. Ukraine's success in implementing reforms is, in the view of your Rapporteur, the only instrument for the West to stimulate positive developments in Russia. A successful Ukraine will provide an example for other countries, including Russia, to follow, so that they introduce necessary reforms.

36. Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation and occupation of Crimea continues while the Kremlin has chosen the path of plausible deniability of its military presence in the Donbas where it maintains regular forces which still direct most military actions of the illegal armed groups operating in the region. Russia still has not fully implemented the Minsk Agreements. Violations of the ceasefire continue to occur daily. This shows how fragile, unstable and dangerous the situation is, and how urgent it is to step up the pressure and push for an end to this escalating violence and a recommitment to the Minsk Agreements. Russia also continues its occupation of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia where it is also pursuing an extensive, illegal military build-up.

37. Georgia is a NATO aspirant country which shares the common values of the Alliance. It continues the consolidation of democracy and contributes significantly to Euro-Atlantic security, including through its participation in NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. Georgia is confident that membership in the Alliance would strengthen Euro-Atlantic security and contribute to regional stability. Georgia is intent on stimulating further institutional reforms and on consolidating democracy throughout the region. Georgia's NATO membership will send a strong signal that, despite tremendous external pressure, the success of democracy and the integration into Western structures is achievable and that attempts to reintroduce spheres of influence and limit the free choice of sovereign states are unacceptable.

38. Another area where Russia is showing increasing assertiveness is the Western Balkans. As NATO Allies have focused on Afghanistan, the fight against extremist groups and challenges from the South, this region has somehow fallen off NATO's radar screen. This situation is compounded by the fact that the EU has become increasingly preoccupied with internal matters, particularly "Brexit", the continuing economic and financial crisis and migration. By offering incentives, e.g., via loans, energy projects, trade and other investments, Russia has increased its engagement with the region, thereby also trying to delay the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU. Moreover, Moscow is using every opportunity, including corruption if necessary, to advance its interests and to bolster anti-Western sentiment, in particular among Serbs, and to undermine Western influence throughout the region.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

39. The security threat on NATO's eastern flank continues and has indeed increased since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The security threat primarily originates from Russia and started in 2008 with Russia's military intervention in Georgia and subsequent military reform. While the Kremlin's challenge to the European security order had been largely ignored, this changed with Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Today, NATO Allies perceive Russia's actions in Ukraine, as well as large-scale military exercises, the development of offensive capabilities and military infrastructure, the conduct of information warfare and continuing unpredictability and a lack of transparency as a threat to their security. Moscow pursues a policy that aims at undermining the Alliance and destabilising Europe, in order to create a new security architecture in Europe that is more conducive to Russia's national interests. Unfortunately, the Kremlin considers its relationship with NATO and NATO member states as a "zero-sum game".

40. If NATO Allies do not counter the Kremlin's provocative behaviour, Moscow will continue this approach. The political leadership in Russia sees itself in an ideological conflict with the West, which is reflected by its ambition to create a multi-polar world that presumes dismantling the existing global security architecture. Therefore, and to avoid potential miscalculations by Russian decision-makers, NATO Allies need to clearly signal the "red lines" which the Kremlin must not overstep. This is also important as the Kremlin pursues its aggressive nuclear rhetoric and has allegedly deployed a land-based cruise missile that violates the spirit and intent of the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty which bans ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with

ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. The decisions taken at the NATO Summits in Wales and in Warsaw were appropriate and measured responses to the challenges posed by the Kremlin.

41. It is necessary for NATO to develop a comprehensive containment strategy, and Allies need to remain committed to a strong deterrence posture and support all efforts to adapt the Alliance to a dynamically changing security environment. Allies need to respond effectively to the dissemination of false information from Russia. This is also important in order to challenge the narrative of a “declining West”, a ploy that the Kremlin applies to undermine our democratic societies as well as the effectiveness and cohesion of the Alliance. Therefore, member nations need to build and improve cyber resilience and keep up with technological developments. Moreover, the growing prevalence of cyber warfare, disinformation and propaganda activities as means of extending state influence, and the growing number of cyberattacks, require that cyber warfare be fully integrated in the defence of NATO Allies. If NATO Allies do not invest resources in this area, they are certain to encounter security challenges. Also, the Allies should stay firm on Russia’s annexation and occupation of Ukrainian territories as well as regarding occupation and factual annexation of Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to continue to call on Russia to revoke their recognition of independence.

42. As stated at the outset, NATO-Russia relations are currently at their lowest since the end of the Cold War. The current stand-off between Russia and NATO in Europe is more dangerous and less predictable than in the Cold War. This is why it is important to complement containment and deterrence with regular, focused and meaningful dialogue with Russia, on the basis of reciprocity in the NATO-Russia Council, with a view to avoiding misunderstanding, miscalculation and unintended escalation, and in order to increase transparency and predictability. It is important to note that a dialogue occurs when the two are not only talking but also listening to each other. Unfortunately, there has not been any desire to listen from the Russian side so far. For a dialogue to be fruitful, both sides should approach each other with an honest wish to find a solution. Regrettably only one side – NATO – has been approaching the other with such an intention. Continuing the NATO-Russia dialogue may not bridge fundamental differences, but it can help to manage the relationship more effectively by trying to find joint approaches to common problems.

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