
NATO AND RUSSIA PLAYING DANGEROUS GAME WITH MILITARY BUILD-UP

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It has been billed as Natos biggest military build-up on Russias borders since the cold war. Britain is sending fighter jets next year to Romania. The US is dispatching troops, tanks and artillery to Poland. Germany, Canada and other Nato countries also pledged forces at a meeting on Wednesday of defence chiefs in Brussels.

The move comes after Russia has been busy deploying hardware of its own. Earlier this month, Moscow said it was stationing nuclear-capable missiles in Kaliningrad, Russias Baltic exclave. This week, two Russian warships armed with cruise missiles slipped into the Baltic sea.

Meanwhile, the hulking Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov has been belching its way through the Channel en route to Syria. Spain said Moscow had withdrawn a request to refuel on Spains north African coast, amid western suspicions the Russian fleet will be used to flatten civilians in Aleppo.

Natos apparent goal here is to deter future acts of aggression on European territory by Vladimir Putins revanchist Russia. After a period in which Nato has seemed slow to react, and lacking in backbone, the alliance is now sending out a robust message. As the US defence secretary, Ash Carter, put it this week, these deployments are all about deterrence.

In particular, Nato wants to signal to Moscow that it is prepared to defend the embattled Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In May, Britain will send an 800-strong battalion to Estonia, supported by the French and Danes. By next summer, about 4,000 troops from Nato countries will face off against 330,000 Russian soldiers stationed on Moscows western border.

None of this means Europe is on the brink of an imminent east-west conflict. Or - as Donald Trump and some commentators have suggested apocalyptically - that the world is gearing up for a third world war. It isnt. Speaking at a conference in Sochi on Thursday, Putin agreed. He told a group of western experts that it was stupid and unrealistic to think Russia might attack anyone in Europe.

Despite the cold war atmospherics, then, there's little prospect of Russian tanks rolling across the border into the Baltic states anytime soon.

Rather, Russias latest sabre-rattling is part of a hybrid Kremlin strategy. Abroad, the goal is to project Russian military power and strength – willy-waving in the words of one analyst. Since Putin became president in 2000, he has been determined to restore Moscows superpower status, with Russia as a global co-equal of US hegemony.

Putin wants to show that no international problem can be solved without the Kremlins views being taken into account. That goes for the Middle East and Syria – where Russia has staged its first large-scale military action outside the borders of the former Soviet Union since communism.

And it goes for Ukraine, the neighbour Putin covertly invaded in 2014, and whose territory Crimea he annexed. Far from not attacking anyone in Europe, about 10,000 people have perished in eastern Ukraine in a war that the Kremlin kicked off and sustained.

Russias armed forces play a key role, but television is important, too. At home, Russian state channels have recently floated the prospect of nuclear war with Washington. (Russias military is inferior to that of the US, but in nuclear weapons it has parity.) Many Russians now dangerously believe their country is already in a state of almost-war, or pre-war, with the west.

This war rhetoric, of course, is designed to deflect attention from Russias domestic woes, which are numerous. They include a worsening economy, western sanctions, recent rigging in Russias parliamentary election and massive state corruption, led from the top by Putin and his billionaire cronies. At home, the propaganda has broadly worked.

Russias president sees Nato is an implacably hostile and aggressive bloc. Paradoxically, Natos newest deployments in eastern Europe merely serve to confirm the story that Putin and state television have been telling Russians for so long: that the west is hell-bent on encircling Russia and bringing it to its knees.

The danger now is not from an open military conflict. Rather with troops deployed in big numbers, and with Russian jets routinely buzzing US aircraft carriers, and other assets, the greater danger is from an accident or collision. In September, a Dutch investigation concluded that it was a Buk missile smuggled across the border from Russia that shot down Flight MH17 in 2014, killing 298

people.

For much of the 1990s, Nato had lost its rationale. In recent years, it has been short of cash. The US has repeatedly complained that many member states are unwilling to pay the price of collective European security. For better or worse, Nato now has a purpose: to contain a growing and unpredictable Kremlin threat.

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