
NATO AND RUSSIA: A REAL INTERNATIONAL CONSPIRACY THRILLER

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Nato is the foundation of our security, is the current political cliché. The Guardian warmly agrees (Editorial, 16 February), and joins in the demonisation of Russia to a degree which should gratify the most ardent hawk. The other side of the matter should be stated. It is not in doubt that the long-term cause of Russian misbehaviour is Nato expansion in the late 1990s, taking in the countries bordering Russia but excluding Russia itself. No serious reason was ever given for this action, and it was in the face of many expressed doubts and warnings by military and political figures at the time. It was followed by the surrounding of Russia with missile defence bases, initiated by the US but taken over by Nato. The effect on Russia was perfectly well understood, and cannot possibly have been unintentional.

Nato is like something from an international conspiracy thriller – except that it is startlingly open about its objectives. It continually searches the world, literally looking for trouble everywhere, and presses at every opportunity to give Nato a role. It has succeeded in doing this in, among other places, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

It might be argued that however the problem was caused, and indeed despite aspects of their own behaviour, certain countries in eastern Europe and the Caucasus now have a genuine security concern which should be addressed. But is it a good idea to give the job to the organisation that deliberately started it in the first place, and has an open interest in encouraging conflict wherever it finds it?

✓ Martin Kettle (Why Brexit Britain's defence strategy is way off course, 17 February) is right to point out the hypocrisy of Theresa May's contrasting stances on Brexit and Nato. However, from the Russian side, its assertiveness is a not unreasonable response to Nato almost immediately crowding its western borders after the collapse of the Soviet Union. History is of prime importance here. Russia has endured major invasions from western powers for centuries; in particular, Sweden, France and Germany as well as Britain (again with France) in the Crimea and of course Britain, America, France and others invading northern Russia via Murmansk and Archangel at the end of the first world war.

In contrast, Russia has never attempted to invade western Europe or come anywhere near attacking this country. However, the popular myth of the Russian threat remains. For in practice, whatever our rulers might say about the duty of government to protect the people, the truth in probably every civilised country which ever existed is that the prime function of government is to protect the rich and powerful from the governed. And as George Orwell so masterly described in Nineteen Eighty-Four, constantly stoking fear and enmity against an outside threat is a very

effective way of achieving this end.

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Russia alarms Kiev and west with Ukraine ID recognition

Move applies to self-declared peoples republics amid shaky ceasefire attempt

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4 HOURS AGO by: Kathrin Hille in Moscow and Roman Olearchyk in Kiev

A move by Russia to recognise identity documents issued in separatist-held areas of eastern Ukraine has raised concern in Kiev and western governments over Moscows intentions, even as efforts were under way to reinforce a shaky ceasefire in the region.

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Vladimir Putin, Russias president, has ordered the government to temporarily recognise identification, education and qualification documents and other certificates as well as car licence plates issued in the self-declared peoples republics, parts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions that are not under Kievs control.

Petro Poroshenko, Ukraines president, said that the Kremlins announcement on Saturday was further evidence of Russian occupation and violation of international law. Moscows move was troubling and inconsistent with [the] agreed goals of the faltering Minsk peace accords, the US embassy in Kiev wrote on Twitter on Sunday.

Mr Putins surprise order came as the foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany met on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference to try to salvage the badly-shaken Minsk deal. Sergei Lavrov, Russias foreign minister, backed a new promise for both sides to cease fire as of Monday.

European diplomats see the Kremlins move as a warning to Ukraine and the west, amid disappointment in Moscow that the new US administration has failed to side with Russia in the conflict. US vice-president Mike Pence met Mr Poroshenko in Munich on Saturday and reaffirmed US support for Ukraine and Washingtons insistence on the implementation of the Minsk agreement.

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Oleksandr Turchynov, secretary of Ukraines National Security and Defence Council

Some Ukrainian officials decried Moscows move as a complete abandonment of the existing peace process. This step by the Kremlin completely destroys the Minsk process and is equal to Russias statement about an exit from that, Russian news agency Interfax quoted Oleksandr Turchynov, secretary of Ukraines National Security and Defence Council, as saying.

Russias step could also be read as moving towards recognition of the self-declared peoples republics in the separatist areas. Its the latest proof that the republic has achieved statehood, said Ihor Plotnitsky, self-declared leader of Lugansk-based militants.

Russian politicians called the Kremlins decision a humanitarian move. They said it was aimed at facilitating travel and allowing Donbass residents to work and study in Russia. Though residents within the internationally-unrecognised breakaway regions are free to travel to Russia using their Ukrainian passports, their school degrees are not accepted in most countries but will now be recognised by Russia.

It is important to understand that this decision has a strict temporary limit □ until the implementation of the Minsk agreements, said Konstantin Kosachev, head of Russias foreign relations committee in the upper house of parliament. He added that Mr Poroshenko could end the situation by speeding up the implementation of [Ukraines] responsibilities under the Minsk agreements.

The Minsk agreement was inked in February 2015. Although the deals provisions for a political solution to the conflict and a restoration of full Ukrainian government control over its eastern border have never been met, it had helped lower the level of violence □ until recently. Last month, fighting flared to the worst levels in more than a year, an escalation foreign observers believe reflects attempts by Russia and Ukraine, respectively, to gain the attention and support of the new US government in the conflict.

European diplomats in Moscow said while Ukraines army had moved weapons before the escalation, it had not crossed the line of control separating both sides. Two diplomats said Russian and Russia-backed fighters in the separatist territories had provoked their Ukrainian adversaries, and the Ukrainian side had reacted forcefully.

Last week, contact groups involving representatives of the fighting parties surprised observers by agreeing new efforts to stop the violence. Mr Lavrov said following the four-way ministerial meeting in Munich that a ceasefire had been agreed for Monday. On February 20 the ceasefire regime will start and withdrawal of heavy military hardware will also start, he said, according to Russian media reports.