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HEAVY METAL DIPLOMACY: RUSSIA'S POLITICAL USE OF ITS MILITARY IN EUROPE SINCE 2014

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SUMMARY

- Since 2014, 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 neighbourhood.
- The main elements are threats of potential military action, wargames which pointedly simulate such operations, the deployment of combat units in ways which also convey a political message, and intrusions close to and into European airspace, waters and even territory.
- The actual impact of these policies is varied, sometimes counter-productive, and they depend on coordination with other means of diplomacy and influence. But they have nonetheless contributed to a fragmentation of unity within both NATO and the European Union.
- 'Heavy metal diplomacy' is likely to continue for the immediate future. This requires a sharper sense on the part of the EU and its member states of what is a truly military move and what is political, a refusal to rise to the bait, and yet a display of convincing unity and cross-platform capacity when a response is required.

There are ballistic missiles and advanced surface-to-air systems heading for Kaliningrad, with explicit warnings that countries contemplating joining NATO or hosting anti-missile facilities should consider themselves potential targets. There are naval flotillas off the Syrian coast, for reasons less to do with the ongoing conflict there and much more to do with making an unsubtle point that NATO should not consider the Mediterranean its pond. There are bombers skirting and even cutting into European airspace. There is an increasing willingness on the part of the Kremlin openly to threaten military consequences – even thermonuclear ones – and to wargame offensive operations to match. It is an uncomfortable time for Europe.¹

It would be easy to present these as the manoeuvres of an aggressor preparing the ground for an attack, especially given the continuing undeclared war in Ukraine. But Russia lacks the capacities or even a reason to launch an offensive in Europe. Instead, they are best considered examples of a distinctively assertive and aggressive political strategy, a form of coercive diplomacy that seeks to compel certain actions and deter others.

Just as disinformation appears to substitute for positive soft power, and 'hybrid war' for conventional military power,² so too this 'heavy metal diplomacy' based on threat appears to be being deployed to make up for the manifest weaknesses of Russian diplomacy since 2014 – when the fall of the Yanukovych regime in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea led to a dramatic deterioration in Russia's relations with

¹ Thanks to Nicholas Saffari for research assistance with this paper.

² Mark Galeotti, "Hybrid War or Gibrnidnaya Voina: Getting Russia's non-linear military challenge right" (Mayak, 2016).

the West and a new willingness on Moscow's part to push the limits of diplomatic relations. The results have been mixed, but, given that Moscow is unlikely to change either in its aspirations or capacities in the immediate future, this approach is likely to be maintained.

Why is Moscow doing this?

"You must understand that if military infrastructure draws close to Russian borders we will naturally take the necessary technical-military measures. There is nothing personal in that, it is just pure business."³

*Russian foreign minister
Sergei Lavrov, May 2016*

The key to understanding Russia's often-provocative methods is to appreciate both the yawning gap between the Kremlin's ambitions and its objective capacities on the one hand, and its – not entirely unfounded – assumptions about Western weaknesses on the other. When viewed through the prism of Russian experiences during and since Soviet times and its very different thinking about political and information warfare, what the West may consider perverse and dangerous brinkmanship appears a logical, even inescapable, choice in Moscow.

In the words of one Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, "if we confine ourselves to the West's model of diplomacy, we are letting them choose the game and pick the teams."⁴ The Russians not only regard it as crucial to assert their status as a great power, they also genuinely regard themselves as faced with active Western efforts, especially since 2014, to marginalise them on the world stage and undermine their social, economic and political institutions at home. If the usual instruments of diplomacy, from soft power to economic muscle, are absent or inadequate, the aim is instead to 'choose the game' where Russia's strengths – a degree of military force and, above all, the will to use it – will count.

It remains to be seen quite how Donald Trump's accession to the White House will change this (if at all). Indeed, the Russians themselves appear deeply divided and uncertain about what to expect from the new president, turning between the hope he will prove less interested in European engagement and support for existing alliances and international norms, and the fear he could prove a belligerent and unpredictable enemy, if provoked. In the absence of any clear steer, though, Moscow appears willing to maintain its present posture.

After all, it is not just that 'heavy metal diplomacy' is a make-do response to a lack of other options. There is a genuine belief among at least some within Vladimir Putin's circle that the European Union is so deeply divided that it can be shattered by the right pressures, creating a potentially far more congenial geopolitical environment for a power which

³ Michael Winiarski, "Om Sverige går med i Nato kommer vi att vidta nödvändiga åtgärder", *Dagens-Nyheter*, 28 April 2016, available at <http://fokus.dn.se/lavrov>.

⁴ Conversation, Moscow, February 2016.

favours bilateral over multilateral relations.

More generally, Russian thinking about the use of the military for political purposes differs from that in the West in both detail and doctrine. To Moscow, 'information war' is a far broader concept, one that spans everything from cyber operations, through propaganda and spin, to diplomacy and coercive diplomacy. In other words, every act or instrument that carries with it an informational weight, and that can be used to compel or deter, is considered within the same discipline.⁵ Inevitably, then, there is not only a much sharper sense of the political semiology of various acts, there is also a greater temptation to turn for policy impact to what in the West would appear wholly distinct activities. This is combined with a political system, discussed below, which makes it much easier for the Kremlin to deploy undiplomatic means for diplomatic purposes and to choreograph political dramas across a variety of stages and media.

This is not necessarily the same as the way Russia uses political operations to prepare the ground for military action in keeping with what in the West are described as its 'hybrid war' tactics in Ukraine. However, it flows from the same source – an ideological commitment to asserting Russia's great power status whatever the cost, and also a belief that ultimately any tool can be used for political effect.

Moscow's '4Ds'

"[J]oint efforts are being hindered by artificial restrictions, much like NATO and the EU's refusing full cooperation with Russia, creating the image of an enemy, and arms deployment to harden the dividing lines in Europe that the West had promised to eliminate. It appears that old instincts die hard."

*Russian foreign minister
Sergei Lavrov, 2016⁶*

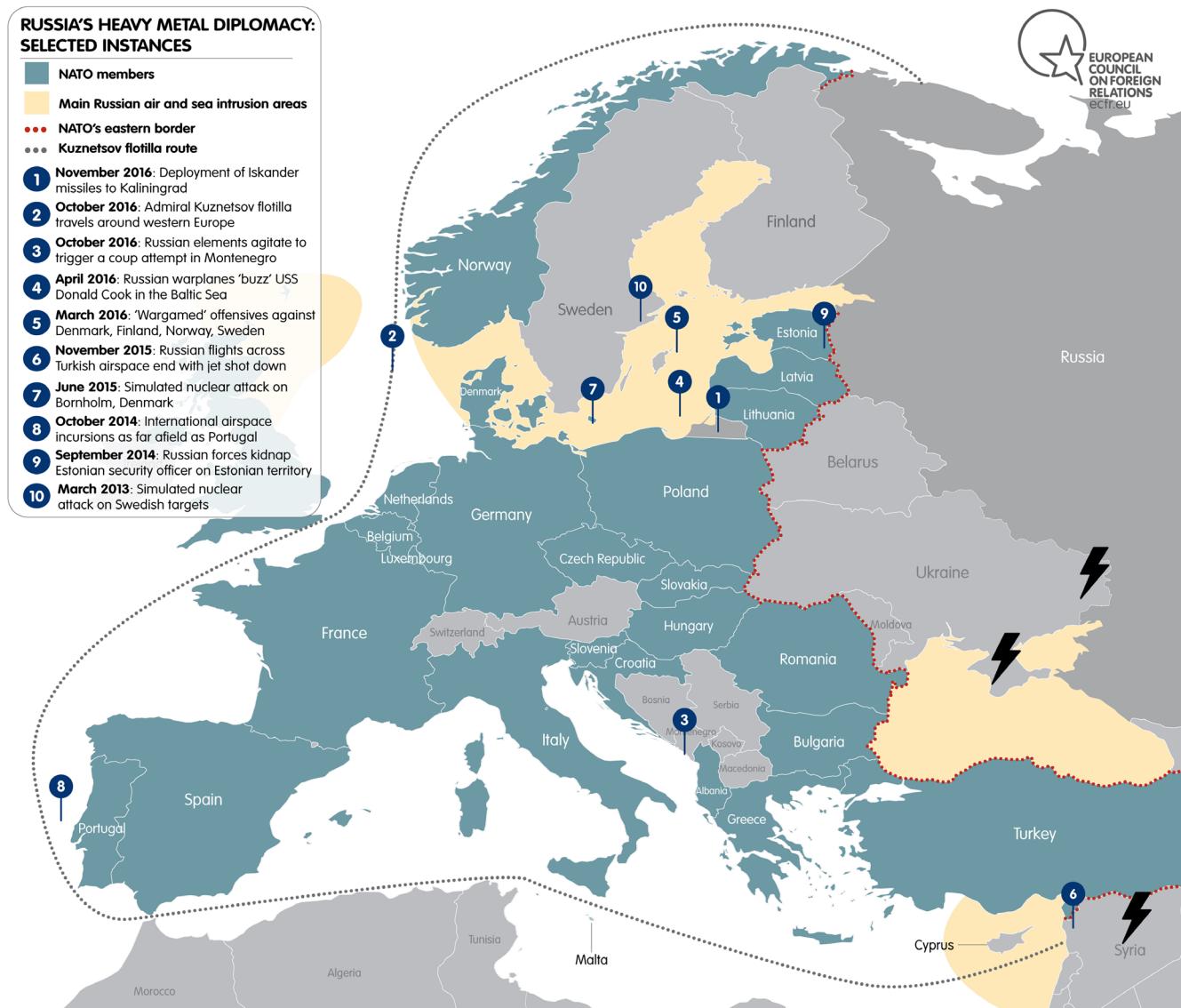
The strategic aims behind this 'heavy metal diplomacy' can broadly be broken into four broad and overlapping 'Ds', all predicated on a belief that the West is seeking actively to contain and undermine Moscow, and especially its attempts – that it considers legitimate – to secure its sphere of influence in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Divide

United, the EU and NATO are, respectively, substantially stronger political-economic and military structures than Russia, so Moscow seeks to exacerbate divisions within them, not least between Europe and the United States in the latter. The evident discomfort other NATO leaders had over the thought of potentially having to back Ankara against Moscow following the shooting-down of a Russian bomber in 2015, for example, certainly contributed to Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rapprochement with Putin. Military tools

⁵ There is a rich body of Russian strategic thought on this. See, for example, Sergei Modestov, "Strategicheskoe sderzhivanie na teatre informatsionnogo protivoborstva", *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk* 26, 1 (2009).

⁶ Speech at the ministerial panel discussion during the Munich Security Conference, February 2016.



are used to bring pressure to bear through burden-sharing arrangements on nations less interested in a tough response along Europe's eastern flank. Division within countries is also a crucial goal, in support of wider measures involving support for extremist and populist forces.

Distract

When contemplating some adventure, Moscow seeks to draw Europe's attention away from the theatre in question. In November 2015, for example, it fired cruise missiles at Syrian targets in an unexpected move (this alarming ally Iran into closing its airspace to further Russian launches) likely in part to have been intended to distract from an uptick in fighting in the Donbas involving heavy weapons meant to have been withdrawn from the line of contact. Given the inevitable concerns about military moves, they become especially effective instruments of diplomatic legerdemain.

Dismay

Crudely put, 'heavy metal diplomacy' is intended to unnerve its audience, to leave publics and even some politicians feeling that the risk of war is such that some kind of accommodation with Moscow – whatever this may mean for others – is the best, even only, option. This is especially important as an instrument of deterrence, of seeking to prevent moves such as Sweden's and Finland's potential joining of NATO, or the reinforcement of European defences. A case in point was German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's claims made after the US-led multinational Anakonda 16 exercises, which were considered crucial to reassuring Poland, in which he said that they would "inflame the situation further through sabre-rattling and warmongering."⁷ This was widely picked up within not just the Russian press, but also the Russian state's foreign-language media, to be reflected back in a bid to influence European opinion.

⁷ "German minister warns Nato against 'warmongering'", BBC, 18 June 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36566422>.

Dominate

While there is no evidence that Moscow harbours any further territorial ambitions, it is gripped with a 19th century enthusiasm for spheres of influence. Its primary concern is to assert its authority over what it regards as its rightful 'backyard' of the post-Soviet states (bar the Baltic states). That said, if there is the opportunity for it to acquire any secondary influence further afield, it would no doubt gladly seize it.

One crucial point to make, though, is that whereas many elements of Moscow's political campaign against Europe – the disinformation, the intelligence operations, the cultivation of 'useful idiots' – are often the product of individual and institutional initiative, entrepreneurially taking advantage of opportunities to act in accordance with the Kremlin's broad wishes, this is rarely the case with 'heavy metal diplomacy.' Beyond bombastic threats from commentators and parliamentarians, this involves not just strategic decisions, but coordinated ones involving the state-controlled media, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence. This is all the more so when the acts go beyond mere words but involve military deployments and budget lines. In 'heavy metal diplomacy', unlike the wider political campaign, coordination appears to be handled by the Presidential Administration and the Security Council secretariat.⁸

Threats and rumours of war

"Why are we reacting to NATO expansion so emotionally? We are concerned by NATO's decision-making... What should we do? We have, therefore, to take countermeasures, which means to target with our missile systems the facilities, that, in our opinion, start posing a threat to us."⁹

Vladimir Putin, November 2016

For a country formally committed to global amity, Russia speaks the language of military threat with striking frequency. Sometimes blunt to the point of thuggish, sometimes elegantly veiled, nonetheless Moscow is not reluctant to issue warnings of dire military consequences through government figures, parliamentarians, or other authoritative voices considered to speak for the Kremlin.

For example, countries contemplating joining NATO or hosting elements of its anti-missile system have consistently been threatened with becoming targets. In 2015, both Denmark and Norway faced a stream of threats, implicit and explicit. First deputy prime minister Dmitri Rogozin warned that:

"Politicians in Poland and Scandinavia should think very carefully about the decisions they make regarding NATO's Washington-directed missile defence weapons project."

⁸ This was confirmed by several Russian officials, including one former Presidential Administration staffer, in Moscow during conversations in January and March 2016.

⁹ "New Russia missiles in Kaliningrad are answer to U.S. shield - lawmaker", *Reuters*, 21 November 2016, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-missiles-kaliningrad-idUKKBN13GoVR>.

Irresponsible decisions will inevitably cause an escalation in military threats in Europe that Russia would be required to respond to in a military way."¹⁰

Russia's ambassador to Copenhagen, Mikhail Vanin, even more bluntly said:

"Denmark would be part of the threat against Russia. It would be less peaceful and relations with Russia will suffer. It is, of course, your own decision – I just want to remind you that your finances and security will suffer."¹¹

Recent debates within Sweden and Finland have generated even more depth and density of aggressive rhetoric, with both countries being warned that any such moves would elevate them into targets for Russian retaliation. Ambassador to Stockholm Viktor Tatarintsev pointedly noted that while at present, "Sweden is not a target for our armed forces," were the country to join NATO "there will be consequences" and "the country that joins NATO needs to be aware of the risks it is exposing itself to."¹² Likewise, Putin himself asked: "Do you think we will continue to act in the same manner" if Finland joins NATO? Noting that Russian troops had been pulled back from their common border, he added: "Do you think they will stay there?"¹³

Likewise, the decisions by both Romania and Poland to house facilities associated with Europe's missile shield prompted the explicit warning that they will "know what it means to be in the cross-hairs."¹⁴ Such language goes well beyond the usual diplomatic lexicon, but that is the point: it is deployed to shock and dismay. However, after a certain point it also risks becoming formulaic. As one Western ambassador put it, "once you've spent a year working with the Russians, you come to realise this is bark more than bite."¹⁵ In order to maintain the impact, a certain "rhetoric race" becomes necessary, and, especially to this end, Moscow often looks to alternative voices. Parliamentarians, media commentators known to be close to the Kremlin, and authoritative think-tanks and academics become surrogate threateners.

The great virtue of these second-string heralds of doom is that they are not only more free to speak in even more incendiary terms, but they can also easily be denied, if their interventions become inconvenient. Dmitri Kiselev, host of the weekly *Vesti Nedeli* television news programme and head of the *Rossiya Segodnya* media network, has become infamous for his outspoken and often vicious attacks on the West and post-Maidan Ukraine, not least his claims of pogroms of Russian-speakers organised by Kyiv.

¹⁰ Gerard O'Dwyer, "Norway's NATO Missile Defense Aid Irks Russia", *Defense News*, 17 June 2015, available at <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/budget/2015/06/17/norway-missile-defense-budget-nato-russia-high-north-2-relations-cooperation/71021708>.

¹¹ Interviewed in *Jyllands-Posten*, 20 March 2015, available at <http://jyllands-posten.dk/indland/ECE7573125/Ruslands-ambassad%C3%B8r-Danske-skibe-kan-blive-m%C3%A5l-for-russisk-atomangreb>.

¹² "Rysslands ambassadör: Vi har gjort allt för att starta en dialog", *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 June 2015, available at <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/rysslands-ambassador-vi-har-gjort-allt-for-att-starta-en-dialog>.

¹³ "Putin: Russia to respond if Finland joins NATO", *RT*, 1 July 2016, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/349185-putin-nato-dialogue-start>.

¹⁴ Denis Dyomkin, "Putin says Romania, Poland may now be in Russia's cross-hairs", *Reuters*, 27 May 2016, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-europe-shield-idUSKCN0Y12ER>

¹⁵ Conversation, Prague, November 2016.

On the day of the Crimean annexation referendum, 16 March 2014, he pointedly warned that “Russia is the only country in the world capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash,” a soundbite that has been endlessly repeated, so much so that this became inconvenient even for the Kremlin. In October 2016, Putin personally distanced himself from Kiselev’s language, disingenuously calling it “harmful rhetoric, and it’s not something I welcome.”¹⁶

Of course, this raises the problem of knowing quite when some commentator is truly speaking for Russia, or when he or she is actually simply expressing personal views or, more complex yet, expressing views that the speaker assumes will please the Kremlin. This is, however, a problem for the West more than for Russia. Unpredictability and a pervasive sense of constant potential threat is central to Moscow’s diplomatic strategy, and the more a risk-averse Europe is uncertain about potential Russian “red lines” and intent, the happier the Kremlin. This approach is not always especially impactful, especially the more it is used, but it is cheap, easy, deniable, and also plays well with other, more muscular forms of coercive diplomacy.

Wargaming aggression

“Not a single action within the military training of the Russian army, including an expected operability test, violates international agreements and treaties... The real aim of allegations about the Russian military threat is to intentionally create panic and maintain the image of a treacherous enemy, fighting which can provide colossal military budgets.”

*Russian defence ministry
spokesperson Igor Konashenkov¹⁷*

As part of Putin’s ambitious plan to rebuild military capacity, the Russian armed forces now train much more often, more extensively and more seriously than at any time since the collapse of the USSR.¹⁸ To be most useful, exercises need to replicate the kind of operations the forces are likely to find themselves facing, something every military understands. What this also means is that exercises can be used to warn and threaten, by simulating attacks or other kinds of operation against neighbours, in the full knowledge that those neighbours will carefully be watching them in the hope of gleaning some insights into Kremlin intent.

Hence, while, in the main, Russia’s field and command post exercises ought to be considered, first and foremost, attempts to build and maintain operational capacity, they are also used in a secondary role as ‘heavy metal diplomacy.’ This is especially the case when they wargame operations bound to attract Western attention – especially given that Moscow’s media will often then showcase them, just in case

¹⁶ “Putin Distances Himself From Remarks by the Kremlin’s ‘Chief Propagandist’”, *Moscow Times*, 28 October 2016, available at <https://themoscotimes.com/news/putin-distances-himself-from-remarks-by-kremlin-chief-propagandist-55919>.

¹⁷ “NATO aims to feed fears by painting Russia as ‘treacherous enemy’ – Russian Defense Ministry”, *RT*, 16 June 2016, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/346865-russia-nato-unexpected-drills-accusation>.

¹⁸ Johan Norberg, “Training to fight – Russia’s Major Military Exercises”, 2011–2014 (FOI, 2015).

Europe was not paying close enough attention – and yet which lack an underlying military rationale or otherwise are out of step with wider preparations.

Sometimes such exercises are highlighted in foreign-language media, but it is also done in domestic media known to be watched by Western Russian-watchers. The *Zvezda* military television channel’s regular Sunday morning ‘Sluzhu Rossii’ (‘I Serve Russia’) magazine programme, for example, regularly highlights major military exercises and operations, such as the July 2014 surprise inspection of nuclear strike forces in Irkutsk that conducted mock deployments and that were a thinly veiled launch on targets to the West.

Again, the Nordic states have been particular targets. Even before the downturn in relations caused by the Ukrainian revolution and annexation of Crimea, Moscow had continued to wargame potential conflicts on its western flank. However, whereas the massive 2013 Zapad (‘West’) military exercises had at least stopped short of simulating nuclear strikes, since the annexation of Crimea and subsequent worsening of relations, Moscow has increasingly wargamed even such situations. Of course, it has held nuclear training exercises before – as do the US and all nuclear powers – but since 2014 it has shifted to a more explicit focus on Europe.¹⁹ One Russian officer speculated that “Zapad-2017 might end like Zapad-2009,” referring to an infamous exercise that ended with a simulated nuclear strike on Poland.²⁰

Furthermore, the snap exercises which Russia has increasingly been mounting, while undoubtedly of great value in assessing training shortcomings and improving operational capabilities, are also used to test and troll Moscow’s neighbours in a manner reminiscent of cold war practice. Given that they can and have been used as covers for offensive operations, as happened before the annexation of Crimea, they inevitably raise concerns in Europe. Indeed, that seems part of the Kremlin’s calculation.

In March 2016, for example, 33,000 Russian troops wargamed offensive operations against Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, including seizing the Aland, Gotland and Bornholm islands. Even less subtle was the exercise in June 2015, when Russian bombers simulated a nuclear attack on Bornholm, timed to coincide with an annual festival when 90,000 guests and Denmark’s political leadership were on the island.

The Baltic region is also frequently the scene for such operations. Kaliningrad, bordering Poland and Lithuania, sees regular snap exercises, often in conjunction with forces in the Russian mainland. Likewise, in October 2016, 5,000 paratroopers carried out exercises in Pskov, close to the Estonian border, with 2,500 undertaking simulated combat jumps. By way of comparison, the total Estonian Land Forces number some 6,400 personnel.

¹⁹ Jacek Durkalec, “Russia’s evolving nuclear strategy and what it means for Europe”, ECFR Commentary, 5 July 2016, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russias_evolving_nuclear_strategy_and_what_it_means_for_europe

Such instruments of ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ have several virtues. They are dual-use, in that as well as bringing pressure to bear on Europe, they are also valuable in their own right, as training opportunities. They can be given a coercive dimension often at little extra cost, especially if there are virtual command post exercises rather than physical ones. They are also easily deniable: Moscow always claims to be running purely defensive exercises. They are also controllable: the risk of a wargame becoming a war is minimal.

Symbolic deployments

“This is not about reaching for some foreign policy goals, satisfying ambitions, which our Western partners regularly accuse us of. It’s only about the national interest of the Russian Federation.”

Sergei Ivanov, then head of the Presidential Administration, on the deployment of Russian troops to Syria, 2015²¹

After years of threat and warning, and of moving the missiles there temporarily for ‘drills,’ in November 2016, not only did Moscow confirm that it was going to deploy Iskander-M (SS-26) missiles into its Kaliningrad exclave, it also said they would be accompanied by advanced S-400 air defence systems. Inevitably, the fact that the Iskander can bear a nuclear warhead drew particular attention to the deployment, even though it is primarily configured for precision strikes with conventional payload, and has been used in this capacity in Georgia and Syria.

However, this is a deployment eight years in the making. In November 2008, then-president Dmitri Medvedev threatened it if NATO went ahead with its planned ballistic missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic. When NATO instead turned to relying on US Aegis cruisers mounting SM-3 missiles, Moscow again began to get concerned. As usual, a worried Kremlin is a threatening one, and in 2011 Medvedev reopened the idea.

To an extent, the deployment was and is inevitable: there is only so long a country can cry wolf. Nonetheless, it has garnered the anticipated reactions of horror and concern. The US State Department has warned that it is “destabilising to European security,” a view echoed by Lithuania (which said it “increases tensions in the region”), while Polish defence minister Antoni Macierewicz called it of the “highest concern.”²²

In many ways, that is again the point. The practical implications of the Iskanders are not all that great. It does give Moscow certain additional capacities in a time of all-out war, but it is not in any way a game-changer. If anything the anti-air/area denial (A2/AD) implications of the proposed deployment of S-400s, which would be able to contest the skies over northern Poland and the southern Baltic Sea, are

more serious. Nonetheless, there is a special symbolic value to anything which has, or could have, nuclear warheads. The deployment of two Buyan-M missile corvettes to the Baltic Fleet in October 2016, for example, was militarily significant because their Kalibr cruise missiles greatly extend the range and capacity of existing Russian systems present, but it aroused particular political attention because they can mount nuclear warheads.

Combat deployments also often have an additional, symbolic role. The deployment in October 2016 of a small flotilla based around the *Admiral Kuznetsov* aircraft carrier to provide additional fire support in Syria, like the earlier use of cruise missiles from ships in the Caspian Sea in November 2015 and the Rostov-on-Don submarine and surface ships in the Mediterranean since then, were classic examples of military theatre. The missiles and Kuznetsov’s air strikes had little real impact on operations in Syria, certainly nothing that could not have been accomplished by the existing air contingent there. On the other hand, their ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ significance was considerable.

The cruise missile launches delivered striking visuals that made it onto television screens and websites around the world, and underscored the long-range reach of Russia’s military and also the capacities of its newer systems. As for the Kuznetsov, while its smoky and stolid plod from Severomorsk through the North Sea, English Channel and Strait of Gibraltar raised some derision, this was nonetheless the very first combat mission for this 25-year-old carrier. More to the point, it was accompanied by the *Petr Velikii*, a missile cruiser mounting a formidable anti-shipping arsenal, whose presence owed less to any value in Syria than as a reminder to NATO not necessarily to consider the Mediterranean *mare nostrum*, its sea.

As with politically framed wargames and exercises, these deployments perform both practical military and ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ roles, and as such the cost of the latter aspect is often rolled into the upfront expense of the deployment. They are similarly deniable. On the other hand, they do carry with them some greater risks. First of all, whereas training exercises at home are easily controlled, such deployments take place in operational spaces where the potential for unexpected incidents is that much greater.

More broadly, the use of actual conflicts in Syria and Ukraine as tools of political leverage in Europe also risks affecting how Moscow manages those conflicts and its own role within them. For example, Russia involved itself directly in the Syrian conflict at least in part to counter attempts to isolate it diplomatically and to force the West to engage with it. In this it was successful, not least forcing Barack Obama to meet with Putin during the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015. Since then, Russia has let opportunities to withdraw from the conflict pass, and, according to officials in Moscow, this is also to an extent out of fear that it would lose leverage in the region and with the West if it did. As a result, Moscow has a perverse incentive to see the conflict continue, as it justifies its presence there.

²¹ “Russian parliament unanimously approves use of military in Syria to fight ISIS”, RT, 30 September 2015, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/317013-parliament-authorization-troops-abroad>.

²² “Russia deploys nuclear-capable missiles in Kaliningrad”, BBC, 9 October 2016, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-37597075>.

HEAVY METAL DIPLOMACY



	Diplomacy	Threat	Wargames	Deployment	Intrusions	Hostilities
	Peace	← →				War
Level of ambiguity		Can be ambiguous but deniable	Action is evident, intent is deniable	Action is evident, intent is deniable	Unambiguous and hard to deny	
Cheap		✓	?	✗	?	
Dual use		✗	✓	✓	?	
Controllable		✗	✓	?	✗	
High impact		?	?	✓	✓	
High risk		✗	?	?	✓	

Intrusions and provocations

"The scale of Russian intrusions is unprecedented in numbers and aggressiveness since the cold war days. Frankly, we are getting exhausted."

NATO officer in the Baltic Air Policing force²³

Russian ships and aircraft – mainly strategic bombers – have routinely skirted or penetrated the airspace of European states, and submarines and warships have entered territorial waters. In the past, these tended to be specific, short-term expressions of the Kremlin's displeasure, such as the uptick in incidents in British airspace following the murder of Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 and consequent condemnations from London.²⁴ Occasionally, they also came in the context of wider military exercises, such as the March 2013 incident when two Tu-22M3 strategic bombers escorted by four Su-27 fighters simulated an attack on Swedish targets.

Since 2014, though, this has become a regular, long-term issue. Although especially evident in northern European skies and waters, it has also been an issue in the Black Sea, where since 2014 the Turkish air force has periodically shadowed Russian patrols, and as far afield as international airspace off Portugal, where Tu-95 long-range bombers have ranged, supported by necessary tanker aircraft.

These incidents typically generate both diplomatic and often military responses. The Baltic Air Policing force, a rotating NATO contingent, had to scramble to intercept Russian intrusions on 47 occasions in 2013. In 2014, NATO

and allied aircraft had to scramble over 400 times, and the level of intrusions continued into 2016.²⁵ NATO and Nordic vessels have also had to see off definite or suspected Russian surface and submarine naval intrusions.

There have been directly confrontational incidents, such as in April 2016, when warplanes buzzed the USS Donald Cook – coming within 10m of the destroyer – and came dangerously close to a US RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft, both times over the Baltic Sea. Generally, though, this has largely become a ritual process, and the very predictability of the exchange helps explain the role of such provocations from the Russian perspective.

They maintain a sense of low-level threat and concern among publics and policymakers and encourage a feeling of vulnerability, a sense that it is impossible to keep Russian forces from the national heartland. Even the kidnapping of Estonian security officer Eston Kohver in 2014, the only cross-border land intrusion since 2014, while essentially intended to block his investigations into crimes associated with Russian intelligence, also had the virtue from Moscow's perspective of challenging the promises of security and support made by Obama in Tallinn just two days earlier.

These intrusions also seek to widen existing divisions within NATO, not least by the need to spend scarce resources on what can be considered meaningless exercises. For the Mediterranean nations, in particular, which see migration, chaos, and potential terrorism from North Africa and the Middle East as at the very least an equal threat to anything coming from Russia, this is a particular concern.

²³ Conversation, Tallinn, May 2016.

²⁴ Andrew Foxall, "Close Encounters: Russian Military Intrusions into UK Air- and Sea Space Since 2005" (Henry Jackson Society, 2015)

²⁵ Brad Lendon, "NATO jets scrambled more than 400 times this year for Russian intercepts", CNN, 21 November 2014, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/21/world/europe/nato-russia-intercepts>.

Combined with the sense imparted that it would be a futile exercise – and alarmist accounts of Russian military capabilities from think-tanks and the like do not help – this helps explain the reluctance on the part of some member states' populations to contemplate living up to their Article 5 commitments by helping an ally under Russian attack. A 2015 Pew poll, for example, found that only 48 percent of Spaniards, 47 percent of French and 40 percent of Italians so willing (with 47 percent, 53 percent and 51 percent respectively actively opposed).²⁶

Prospects and lessons

“[The Russians] have tried to break the solidarity of Western countries, sow insecurity and exploit windows when readiness to react to their provocative steps is lower. It's inevitably a moment when we must be ready ourselves to react very quickly to these changing threat assessments and keep the attention of our allies.”

*Estonian foreign minister
Sven Mikser, November 2016²⁷*

How far is ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ working? Tactically, it would certainly seem to be having some effect, especially in Moscow’s eyes. But on a strategic level, it is rather less clear whether or not it is leading to the desired results, especially if one considers the three issues most crucial to the Kremlin:

NATO unity

There are undoubtedly stresses within the alliance, and the prospects of the Trump presidency create all kinds of uncertainties of their own. However, while Russia’s actions may have exacerbated them, in many ways the stresses reflect more fundamental differences of opinion and perspective between national governments as to the direction and nature of the real threat and some publics’ lack of enthusiasm for military answers to present problems. If anything, the constant Russian pressure has actually given the alliance a greater relevance. As NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg notes in his latest report:

“Five Allies now meet our guideline on spending 2% of GDP or more on defence. Sixteen Allies spent more on defence in real terms in 2015 than they did in 2014. Of those, 12 increased defence spending as a percentage of GDP. Twenty-three Allies also increased the amount they are spending on new equipment, with eight allocating more than 20% of their defence budget.”²⁸

This does not sound like an alliance on the verge of collapse, and interlocutors in Moscow also tend to see NATO’s survival as a given and Article 5 as a strong guarantee. Nonetheless, Russian security officials continue to express

²⁶ Pew Research Centre, “NATO Publics Blame Russia for Ukrainian Crisis, but Reluctant to Provide Military Aid”, June 2015, available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/10/nato-publics-blame-russia-for-ukrainian-crisis-but-reluctant-to-provide-military-aid>.

²⁷ Ott Ummel, “Russian ‘Provocation’ Risks Irks Estonia Amid U.S. Transition”, Bloomberg, 1 December 2016, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-01/russian-provocation-risk-worries-estonia-amid-u-s-transition>.

²⁸ NATO, NATO Secretary-General’s Report, 2016, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_127331.htm.

the belief that keeping NATO under pressure could exhaust the enthusiasm of some members in the long run. In the words of one, “the next time there is a surge in migrants from Africa, the southern states will wonder why they are patrolling the Baltic.”²⁹ It also keeps NATO member states’ attention on military defences rather than the non-kinetic challenges such as financial and political subversion, that arguably represent a more clear and present threat.³⁰

EU unity

That the EU is facing a crisis, or rather an interconnected series of crises, is hard to question.³¹ In this context, ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ appears to play a minimal role, especially when compared with the wider Russian campaigns of disinformation, political interference, and support for divisive movements and parties.³² If anything, Russian military adventurism has again helped galvanise at least the security-related dimension of the EU. This is something that is beginning to be recognised in Moscow. But, given that mollifying the EU while maintaining pressure on NATO and prospective members is likely to be a circle that is impossible to square, the Russians will likely not even try to change their policies. Instead, they will hope that a combination of endogenous fragmentary pressures and their own machinations will make the EU sufficiently disunited that it does not matter what security policies and strategies emerge from Brussels or member state capitals.

On the other hand, given that the primary aim of Russian operations is to reduce the EU’s will and capacity to resist Kremlin policy at home and within its immediate strategic neighbourhood, there is a belief in Moscow that it has had some success. Debates about security issues, as well as open differences in priority and perspective between ‘front line states’ such as Poland and the Baltics, and others who see Russia as much less of a real or immediate challenge, have helped keeping the Union “busy talking and negotiating rather than acting.”³³

The Nordic debates

If anything, from a ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ perspective, the prospect of Swedish and Finnish membership of NATO and a general securitisation of relations in the Nordic region is a greater priority. In Moscow there is an awareness that military pressure has helped move elite views towards higher defence budgets and at the very least closer military cooperation with NATO. In Sweden, for example, the four opposition parties have for the first time agreed on a united position to join NATO, and the country is contemplating reinstating conscription. In Finland, although the political position is less clearly supportive of abandoning neutrality, a

²⁹ Conversation, Moscow, March 2016

³⁰ Mark Galeotti, “Can governance Trump guns? European security after the US elections”, ECFR Commentary, 21 November 2016, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_can_governance_trump_guns_european_security_us_elections_7189.

³¹ Josef Janning, “The complex tale of EU cohesion”, ECFR Note from Berlin, 3 March 2016, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_complex_tale_of_eu_cohesion_6019.

³² Fredrik Wesslau, “Putin’s friends in Europe”, ECFR Commentary, 19 October 2016.

³³ Conversation with Russian diplomat, Prague, October 2016.

telling move was the proposal by the government for a joint EU-NATO Centre of Excellence in combating ‘hybrid warfare’ (in many ways a euphemism for Russian aggression). Thus, although Moscow retains the hope that it is also helping keep respective publics uncertain and hesitant, these represent clear instances of ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ proving counter-productive. For all that, though, the present pressure is therefore unlikely to abate, not least because, as one Russian diplomatic source observed, “it is for the moment difficult to reverse course and try and make friends; it is the current policy or it is nothing.”³⁴

In conclusion, then, it is crucial to appreciate that Russia’s military postures hold political significance rather than represent a real threat of invasion. The Kremlin has advanced no territorial claims on NATO or EU member states, expressed no imperial ambitions, and is well aware of the catastrophic risks of a direct war with the West. Indeed, the whole essence of its current strategy is to calibrate a level of pressure that stays well short of risking triggering such a conflict, while still disrupting and influencing European states.

Furthermore, by targeting NATO and EU cohesion, this is a European challenge, and not one confined to the Nordic ‘usual suspects,’ simply because that is where most of the threats are made. Besides, these tactics are also being used elsewhere, from the English Channel to the Balkans. Montenegro is on track to become NATO’s newest member, for example, but had to weather threats of economic sanctions in 2015, even more aggressive rhetoric, and then, according to outgoing prime minister Milo Đukanović, a Russian attempt to orchestrate a coup in October 2016.³⁵

The Kremlin appears genuinely uncertain quite how effective ‘heavy metal diplomacy’ is proving. There clearly is some awareness that the policy risks being counter-productive, and that, while it has had some apparent successes intimidating and compelling desirable decisions, it has also empowered those in Europe wanting a tougher line against Russia and led to a backlash in both NATO (such as the Warsaw Summit decision to deploy international battalions in Poland and the Baltic States) and the EU (including its decision to label Russia a “strategic challenge”).

The prospect of a Trump presidency, as noted above, at present does not seem to be persuading Moscow to tone down its approach. Insofar as it is possible to draw any meaningful conclusions from his campaign rhetoric and early statements, Trump appears uninterested in the normative struggle taking place in Ukraine and hostile to entangling alliances. While he is not going to turn his back on Europe, neither does he seem eager to devote thought and effort to the question of Russian pressure upon it. The Kremlin is therefore likely to see no reason to stop its campaign; it may possibly even see a reason to step it up. After all, a Europe unconvinced that the US has its back might, the calculation goes, be more vulnerable to ‘heavy metal diplomacy.’

³⁴ Conversation, Prague, October 2016.

³⁵ Although chief special prosecutor Milivoje Katnić had drawn the distinction that while Russian nationalists were behind the attempted coup, he lacked the evidence yet definitively to say whether the Russian government was or was not involved.

However, in the absence of any more effective or credible approaches and hoping to capitalise on political upsets in the US, Britain and Italy, as well as possibly in due course France, Moscow appears likely to continue the campaign for the immediate future, even if modulated in detail, and accompanied with a more subtle and multi-platform campaign to shape the associated narratives. Already, for example, the expensive tempo of air intrusions declined during 2016, and instead the recreation of division-strength armoured and mechanised formations in Russia’s Western Military District are being hyped as the basis for a new wave of veiled menaces and threatening exercises.

Besides, the regime also maintains its own domestic ‘heavy metal diplomacy,’ regularly asserting that the West is threatening the motherland and using that to justify its policies. The annexation of Crimea has periodically been defended on the grounds that NATO planned to base weapons there, and expand to Ukraine, for example. Thus, the Kremlin has become accustomed to the rhetoric of threat and force, and is unlikely to shed the mindset that accompanies it.

Recommendations

Be smart: Distinguish between political and military moves. There is no evidence of a Russian intent to initiate outright hostilities with NATO or, indeed, other European states. The irony is that while NATO members themselves worry that the mutual guarantee of Article 5 may not be firm, in Moscow it is taken very seriously: in conversations with a number of military and foreign ministry officials in January-March 2016, not one expressed any doubts as to its value. Furthermore, there is also an awareness that the alliance would not stand by and see prospective members and its northern flank swallowed by Russia. European states should thus distinguish the overt or implicit political message behind military moves, and tailor their responses to those.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with strengthening military defences; quite the opposite. Both as a deterrent against Russian adventurism and a reassurance for Russia’s neighbours, it is a necessity. However, there needs also to be a clearer sense that Russia’s are essentially political moves and need to be portrayed and addressed in those terms: a military counter may well not be the best or only response.

Be cool: Sometimes initiative is to be gained by inaction or restraint. The current ritual of Russian move and NATO response gives the Kremlin the initiative; it has learned what triggers a Western response and what it will be. These responses are often financially and even politically expensive, such as the regular sorties by NATO Air Policing. There is a case for being less predictable and more relaxed. The scale of Russia’s air harassment campaign in particular is stressing its ageing bomber fleet and leading to a steady toll of aircraft crashing or being forced to undergo early maintenance. Moscow is also gathering useful data about

NATO response times and capabilities. Given that there is no likelihood that, were a bomber flight not met, that it would continue and launch an attack, it may be sensible sometimes to sit back and let Putin burn out his airframes with increasingly pointless provocations.

Be strong: When responses are called for they need to demonstrate capacity and unity. When a response is indicated, though, it needs to be an unflinching and unquestionable expression of NATO and European superiority. Again, this is necessary to address the essentially political nature of the campaign. Small-scale and ad hoc responses may well be worse than useless, as they convey to Moscow and domestic audiences alike a sense of European helplessness. Especially given that whole-hearted support from the US cannot be taken for granted, for the purposes of deterrence abroad and reassurance at home, they should instead demonstrate not just Western unity, but also the very real strengths to be found in Europe, both political and military, visibly and unapologetically.

Be flexible: Respond to multi-instrument campaigns with the same. None of Russia's coercive diplomatic gambits operate in isolation: the 'combined arms' of threatening rhetoric, military deployments, covert subversion, and media spin work most effectively precisely when they work together. By the same token, European and NATO responses ought not to focus on a single medium – whether scrambling fighters or issuing statements – but work on a similar multi-platform basis.

A military response, for example, ought to be combined not only with a confident and proactive media and political campaign explaining its need to domestic constituencies and demonstrating its scale to the Kremlin. It should also demonstrate the West's other, specific, advantages. Just as Moscow has already begun integrating domestic security agencies and even the central bank into its wargames, so too exercises geared to exploring and demonstrating how putative Russian hostilities would be met should also explicitly incorporate offensive economic, cyber, and even subversion and sabotage operations (compared with the present practice that largely confines itself to rehearsing responses to such challenges). Of course, no one need be so impolite as to call the enemies 'Russians.' But just as Moscow holds its aggressive exercises behind a tissue-thin screen of deniability, relying on Europe to draw the right lessons, so too the West can play the same game. If Moscow screams 'provocation,' then it is actually evidence that neuralgic pressure points are being hit.

Be together: Reassurance must be balanced with reconsolidation. Russia's 'heavy metal diplomacy' and the disruptive politics it reflects is military in form but political in nature. Given that it primarily represents an attack on European will, unity, and morale, the responses must likewise go beyond the exclusively tactical. Just as it is crucial to recognise that this is a European and NATO challenge, not simply a Baltic, or Nordic, or even north-east European one,

so too it is vital to acknowledge the real political divisions on which it seeks to capitalise. There are communities of opinion within European nations which genuinely fail to understand why it is important to, for example, install anti-missile defences, or which fear war more than they fear appeasement, and a recent Pew Research Centre poll found 27 percent of Europeans expressing doubts about NATO, compared with 57 percent in favour.³⁶ This cannot simply be hand-waved away as the result of ignorance or Russian disinformation, and addressing these doubts is as important a security challenge as increasing defence budgets, and arguably an even more complex one. In part, this is a challenge for NATO as an institution, but the primary role will have to be played by national governments, including those which to date have been reluctant to challenge the alliance to lukewarm electorates.

There is no imminent prospect of an end to the political war Moscow is waging against NATO in Europe, and 'heavy metal diplomacy' will remain an integral part of this. There may well be a reorientation, with fewer routine intrusions and a greater use of wargames backed by pointed rhetoric. But ultimately the Kremlin will continue to regard its military as an instrument of coercion and persuasion. It has, after all, relatively few alternatives. Europe must therefore brace itself for more heavy-handed displays to come.

³⁶ Pew Research Centre, 'Support for NATO is widespread among member nations,' 6 July 2016, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/06/support-for-nato-is-widespread-among-member-nations>.

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