

Explaining Russian reactions to increased NATO military presence

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Summary

Ever since NATO's enlargement process began, Russia has voiced concerns for the impact of a greater NATO military presence near the Russian border for its national security. While the signing of the 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act eased some tensions, Russia–NATO relations have had their ups and downs. Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014 led NATO to adopt countermeasures aimed at improving the security of its members – such as the deployment of NATO troops to areas deemed for geographical reasons most exposed to potential Russian interventions. This Policy Brief examines Russian reactions to these new NATO deployments, placing them in the broader context of the Russian debate on NATO as a source of strategic concern. It starts with a discussion of the general strategic context, follows with examining the main lines in the Russian debate on NATO as a general security challenge, and continues with an examination of official views on a greater NATO military presence in areas close to Russian borders. It ends with some policy-relevant conclusions on striking a balance between NATO concerns for the security of its members and Russian views on what Moscow defines as national security concerns, using a broader theoretical framework for interpreting how states relate to each other.

The broader strategic context

Russia's perceptions of and relations with NATO should be interpreted within the broader debate on the nature of the international system and the shaping of relations between actors operating on the international arena, paying special attention to the current Russian regime's approach to these questions.

In general terms, inter-state relations can be seen as shaped by **mutual perceptions**,¹ which in turn are shaped by factors such as perceptions of the state of the current international system/order, domestic politics in the countries in question, historical experience, geographical proximity/ distance, technological developments – and, not least, material and power symmetries and asymmetries. Such mutual perceptions can be interpreted along

the whole spectrum of possible relationships, where states may perceive each other as:

- a stranger/outsider – an actor one does not know much about and has no real relation to;
- an enemy – an actor that can pose or poses a security threat;
- a partner – an actor who is seen as not posing a threat, but who may provide opportunities for constructive cooperation on some issues;
- a strategic partner – an actor with whom one shares some strategic interests and works together to address common challenges;
- a member of the same security community – an actor with whom one shares a normative foundation and who is perceived as a highly unlikely enemy, an actor with whom possible issues and problems are solved through negotiations, and the use of military power as a means of solving problems is ruled out.

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Depending on how states perceive each other, their relations, including Russia–NATO relations, can therefore be either securitized or de-securitized: viewed through a security lens as representing a security risk, challenge or even threat; or as not posing a real security challenge in the current context.²

However, inter-state relations and thus perceptions change over time, and will change again – in turn resulting in changed perceptions of security situation of an actor operating in the international system. This must be factored into the strategic calculations and planning of all actors operating in the constantly changing international environment, and neither Russian nor NATO planners can ignore how these changes in relations and perceptions shape their room for strategic manoeuvre. In seeking to identify worst-case scenarios and how to prepare for them, with contingency planning for meeting changes and challenges, policymakers and planners must map the probability of potential risks and challenges and their possible impact on national security. They must take into consideration questions of geographical proximity/distance, symmetry/asymmetry of military and other potentials, the capacity of potential wrongdoers to project various types of power through available technological means, as well as their intentions and the likelihood of their using violent means

to achieve political goals. Historical factors and experience can also be involved in assessing the future evolution of the strategic environment in which states will have to operate.

Many of these general factors appear to have contributed to shaping Russian perceptions of NATO enlargement in general, and NATO deployment of infrastructure and troops on the territory of new members. The following sections examine therefore the evolution of Russian official understandings of NATO as a strategic factor and present the main lines in Russian official and public debate on the impact of NATO deployments on the security of the country.

Russian perceptions of NATO as a strategic factor

The best place to begin an examination of how official Russian perceptions of NATO have evolved after 1991 is to map how NATO has figured in the official doctrines issued by the Russian policymaking community over the past three decades. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. NATO mentions in official Russian doctrines 1993–2016

Doctrine	NATO mentions (N)
1993 Military Doctrine	0
1993 Foreign Policy Concept	5
1997 National Security Concept	2
2000 National Security Concept	2
2000 Foreign Policy Concept	6
2008 Foreign Policy Concept	6
2009 National Security Strategy until 2020	5
2013 Foreign Policy Concept	6
2014 Military Doctrine	4
2015 National Security Strategy	4
2016 Foreign Policy Concept	4

What have been the main lines in Moscow's doctrinal understandings of NATO as a factor in Russia's strategic environment?

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- NATO has been seen as an important partner in solving security-relevant issues of mutual interest through greater interaction and cooperation (FPC 1993, FPC 2000, FPC 2008). However, Russia has made this strategic cooperation dependent on how NATO complies with key clauses of the 1997 Founding Act, particularly 'those concerning non-use or threat of force, and non-deployment of conventional armed forces groupings, nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles in the territories of the new members' (FPC 2000).
- Especially in areas where Russian and NATO security interests overlapped (not collided) this cooperation with NATO has been deemed important and vital (FPC 1993, FPC 2000). These areas were listed in detail in FPC 2008 where terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional crises, drug trafficking, natural and man-made disasters were defined as common threats to be tackled through political dialogue and practical cooperation. The 2013 FPC added maintaining peace and stability, countering common security threats, such as international terrorism, WMD proliferation, maritime piracy, drug trafficking, and natural and man-made disasters as areas of mutually beneficial cooperation. It also mentioned cooperation between Russia and NATO on solving security problems in Afghanistan as another important area of cooperation.
- However, Russia has remained critical to NATO's plans for expanding its area of responsibility, and how this could be

detrimental to Russian security and national interests (NSC 1997, NSC 2000, FPC 2000, FPC 2008). FPC 2008 specifically noted deep concern about plans for admitting Georgia and Ukraine as NATO members.

- Russia has also expressed concern about NATO's out-of-area operations, which have contributed to worsening security, to undermining the existing international order (2000 FPC, 2000 NSC, 2009 NSS) and to the emergence of new splits and dividing lines in Europe (1997 NSC, 2008 FPC, 2013 FPC, 2016 FPC) that contradict the idea of indivisible security (2016 FPC).
- Deep concern has been voiced about the potential presence of NATO military bases and infrastructure close to Russian borders, especially on the territory of new members (2000 NSC, 2008 FPC, 2009 NSS, 2013 FPC, 2014 MD, 2015 NSS, 2016 FPC).
- The 2000 NSC doctrinal document also mentions 'the growing technical advantage of a number of leading powers and their enhanced ability to create new weapons and military equipment' that could trigger a new phase in the arms race, radically altering the forms and methods of warfare.

Russian perceptions of NATO military presence

We now turn to how the question of NATO's military presence figures in the currently valid set of Russian doctrinal documents, and how the issue of such presence close to Russian borders is addressed by Moscow.

The 2014 MD defines the build-up of the power potential of NATO and vesting NATO with global functions as being in violation of the rules of international law. It sees a **major external military risk** in NATO's bringing the military infrastructure of its member countries near the borders of the Russian Federation; likewise, with further expansion of the Alliance. This document also notes other risks that can be linked with what Russia views as NATO's activities. These include destabilization of the situation in individual states and regions, deployment of military contingents of foreign states/groups of states in the territories of states bordering on Russia and its allies, as well as the establishment and deployment of strategic missile defence systems, undermining global stability and violating the established balance of forces. Further, the 2014 MD mentions the idea of maintaining equitable dialogue on European security issues with the EU and NATO as a main mechanism for conflict deterrence and prevention.

As developments that create a **threat to Russian national security**, the 2015 NSS lists the build-up of NATO's military potential, further NATO expansion and the location of its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders. It adds that the regional security system in the Euro-Atlantic Region based on NATO and the EU has proven ineffective, as shown with the recent migration crisis. Further, it describes NATO's increased military activity – with its military infrastructure drawing closer to Russia's borders, the building of a missile defence system, and attempts to endow the bloc with global functions – as developments unacceptable to Russia, because they prevent the development of equitable relations with NATO in the Euro-Atlantic region.

The 2016 FPC accuses NATO and the EU of expansionism and unwillingness to pursue policies that could lead to 'the creation of a common European security and cooperation framework'. It argues that the containment policy adopted by the USA and its allies against Russia, as well as political, economic, information and other pressures put on Russia, act to undermine regional and global stability and are detrimental to the long-term interests of all sides. Further, it notes that **Russia's long-term Euro-**

Atlantic policy aims at building a common space of peace, security and stability based on the principles of indivisible security, equal cooperation and mutual trust. Russia is willing to build its relations with NATO – *if* NATO is ‘ready to engage in equitable partnership, strictly adhere to the norms and principles of international law, take real steps towards a common space of peace, security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region based on the principles of mutual trust, transparency and predictability.’ In addition, Russia wants all NATO members **to comply with the obligations defined in the 1997 Founding Act.** The document reiterates a fairly standard phrase: that Russia ‘maintains its negative perspective towards NATO’s expansion, the Alliance’s military infrastructure approaching Russian borders, and its growing military activity in regions neighbouring Russia’, viewing them as violating the principle of equal and indivisible security.

All currently valid doctrines are highly critical to the NATO military presence close to Russian borders – first and foremost, the slightly more than 5000 NATO troops in the three Baltic countries and Poland (EFP), approximately 700 US Marines in Norway, as well as two elements of the US Missile Defense in Romania and Poland. Key Russian policymakers, including President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov and Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev, have all voiced strong concerns about the negative implications of these NATO deployments for the security of Russia and Europe, warning that Russia would be prepared to take necessary measures to counter these trends.³

Also in the Russian public debate, for instance in the government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*,⁴ NATO enlargement and the increasing presence of its military infrastructure and units on the territory of new members are presented as the main bones of contention in relations between Russia and its NATO partners in the post-Cold War era.

Many on the Russian side and some in the West have argued that NATO should abstain from enlarging and thus deploying its troops, for practical and political reasons – because the Soviet threat, which was originally the main reason for NATO, has disappeared, and because a promise was supposedly given to the Soviet leadership during negotiations on German re-unification that NATO would not enlarge to the east.⁵ However, a recent detailed study on the process of NATO enlargement argues that, although opinions vary greatly, there was no formal promise on non-enlargement of NATO and its military infrastructure given to Russia in connection with the process of German unification.⁶

However, in expressing criticism against the development of NATO infrastructure and troop deployment on the territory of new members, Russian policymakers often refer to several clauses in the 1997 Founding Act,⁷ especially to those on conventional forces. They note that this document states clearly that NATO and Russia are to commit themselves to exercise restraint in relation to the current postures and capabilities of their conventional armed forces, in order to avoid developments in the security situation in Europe that might diminish the security of any state party; and that Russia, NATO and other countries parties to the now-defunct CFE Treaty are to ‘seek to strengthen stability by further developing measures to prevent any potentially threatening build-up of conventional forces in agreed regions of Europe, to include Central and Eastern Europe.’

Russian official and public anti-NATO rhetoric pays special attention to the geographical proximity of NATO deployments as a key source of strategic concern and the issue of NATO’s policy of Russia’s strategic encirclement is often mentioned. Also arguments about the asymmetry of potentials in Russia’s disfavour are often used, with reference to the size of defence budgets of **NATO as a whole** and Russia, as well as to their military potentials. Further,

Russian policymakers and experts sometimes mention the need to catch up technologically with the West as a source of strategic concern, declaring publicly – as in President Putin’s speech from 1 March 2018 – that Russia has made substantial progress in bridging this technological gap by developing new, more advanced weapon systems. Also the matter of Russia’s past historical experience as a victim of Western aggressions is often raised in the official and public debate on NATO’s military presence as a source of strategic concern or threat. Finally, Russian official and public understandings of the international system are strongly tinged with thinking in realist, power terms and interpretations of interstate interactions as zero-sum games.⁸

Policy conclusions

The Russian official and general debate on NATO’s recent deployments has been characterized by considerable one-sidedness. For instance, scarcely mentioned is the fact that NATO has deployed only slightly more than 5000 troops to the most exposed areas⁹ while Russia has amassed most of its military potential in its Western Military District (demonstrating great ability to deploy large units at short notice), creating a clear strategic regional imbalance in its favour.¹⁰ Also little attention has been paid to how Moscow’s actions in 2014 have impacted on NATO and Russian neighbours’ understandings of security, and Russia’s role in the international system – forcing NATO to adopt several measures.¹¹

Keir Giles holds¹² that it is essential to realize that Russian policymakers are not overly receptive to even the most rational arguments about Western strategic intentions. One should therefore realize that no matter how convincing NATO arguments about its purely defensive character are, Russia will most probably maintain its strongly negative attitude towards NATO and its military deployments.

The current Russian leadership’s perceptions of the nature of the international system are deeply rooted in realist approaches to international relations. They are driven by its need to have an external enemy for use as a means of consolidating its domestic position and providing threat-based legitimacy for its aggressive actions abroad and military build-up and harsh anti-democratic measures at home. The regime appeals also to the general public by making references to Russia’s historical experiences and fears and exploiting these fears in its massive anti-Western propaganda.

Since NATO has limited ability to influence Russian public opinion or the policymaking elite continuation of the dual-track policy towards Russia seems to remain the best available option. It should involve following steps on the part of NATO:

- building a credible deterrence to raise the threshold for possible aggressive actions against its members;
- transparent communication of NATO’s intentions, and ideas for making Europe and the joint NATO–Russian neighbourhood a safer place.

Norway should use its unique position and experience to help NATO achieve these two objectives by:

- increasing the level of defence related spending to the 2 percent of GDP to increase both national and NATO capacity to deter and at the same time strengthen NATO’s internal cohesion and trans-Atlantic bonds;
- maintaining a constructive dialogue and communication with Russia to lower the possibility of conflict by accident in the strategically important Northern corner;
- sharing with other NATO allies its intelligence and insights on Russian policy in general and in the region.

Endnotes

1. Wendt, A. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
2. For an interesting examination of various models of international system and relations see for instance Buzan, B. “The English School and International Security.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, edited by Myriam Dunn Cavelty and Victor Mauer, 34–44. London and New York NY: Routledge, 2012.
3. For some examples of these statements see <https://rg.ru/2019/11/08/peskov-nazval-nato-instrumentom-agressii.html>; <https://rg.ru/2019/10/25/lavrov-rf-uchtet-prisutstvie-nato-v-norvegii-pri-voennom-planirovanii.html>; <https://rg.ru/2019/10/19/medvedev-rossiia-budet-otvechat-na-poiavlenie-baz-nato-u-svoih-granic.html>; <https://rg.ru/2019/10/12/putin-zaiavil-ob-obespokoennosti-prodvizheniem-nato-na-vostok.html>; <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2216/>; or <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/news/allnews/2560/>.
4. For an overview of *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*'s coverage of Russia-NATO relations see <https://rg.ru/sujet/3393/>
5. Kramer, M, and J.R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin. “Nato Enlargement—Was There a Promise?”. *International Security* 42, no. 1 (2017): 186–92.
6. Sarotte, M. E. “How to Enlarge Nato: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95.” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019/07/01 2019): 7-41. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00353.
7. Text of the 1997 Founding Act can be found at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm
8. See for instance Lebedeva, Marina. *Russian Studies of International Relations. From the Soviet Past to the Post-Cold-War Present*. Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society. Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 2019.
9. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2019_10/20191024_1910-factsheet_efp_en.pdf
10. For more on that see Boston, S., M. Johnson, N. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Y. K. Crane, Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018.
11. Dyrer, A.M., A. Kacprzyk, W. Lorenz, M. Terlikowski *How Russian Violations of the 1997 Founding Act Influence NATO-Russia Relations*, PISM Policy Paper nr 6 (166), Warsaw: PISM, 2018.
12. <https://icds.ee/the-moscow-rules-ten-principles-for-working-with-russia/>. See also his recently published book Giles, Keir. *Moscow Rules. How Russia Sees the West and Why It Matters*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018.

