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Russia's reaction to the NATO summit in Warsaw

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The decisions taken at the Warsaw NATO summit come as no surprise to Russia, since most of the major arrangements had been announced in public over the past few months. Moscow's disillusionment is rather an effect of the final declaration made at the summit, which was unequivocally critical of Russia (Moscow clearly hoped for a more "balanced" content with more offers of dialogue with Russia). Political reactions from Russia have so far been negative, if rather moderate. Criticism of NATO's policy and the decisions taken at the summit are accompanied by declarations suggesting Russia's is ready for dialogue with NATO, including over a possible deal to avoid military incidents.

Russia has not made any aggressive military moves in response to the summit. However, it confirmed the continuation of its actions to enhance its offensive potential on its western flank (in the Western and Southern Military Districts). These actions had in fact already begun at the end of 2015.

Russia will most likely stick to its tactic of moderate reaction in the coming months in an attempt to strengthen the supporters of dialogue with Moscow among the key NATO member states. It seems that Russia is above all waiting for the outcome of the presidential election in the USA in November this year, hoping that Donald Trump will win. It views Trump as a politician who would be able to enter into a strategic bargain with Russia and to revise US security policy, including to restrict its engagement in Europe. In this context, Russia will focus especially on efforts to set back the implementation of the NATO-US missile defence system project in Europe, in particular construction of the base in Redzikowo, Poland.

Before the summit

Russia knew what the future major US and NATO decisions concerning strengthening NATO's eastern flank would be, and reacted to this by announcing (beginning at the end of 2015) its own decisions to regularly strengthen its military presence on its western flank, in the Western and Southern Military Districts: forming two new armies out of existing units, forming – partly on the foundations of existing units – three new mechanised divisions, and strengthening its military potential in Kaliningrad Oblast and Crimea (for more information, see Appendix).

On the other hand, weeks before the summit, Moscow began to tangibly ameliorate its political tactic on NATO. For example, it refrained from repeating its previous announcements of aggressive actions (such as deployment of Iskander ballistic missile

systems in Kaliningrad Oblast and the threat to withdraw from the Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces). In turn, it was suggested that Moscow was ready to sign an agreement on avoiding military incidents, something NATO member states had long been calling for. In particular, President Vladimir Putin during his visit to Finland on 1 July supported President Sauli Väinämö Niinistö's initiative to strike a deal on avoiding incidents with combat aircraft involved in the Baltic region.

Russian reactions: criticism and open for dialogue

The statements made on 10 and 12 July by Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an interview on 12 July with the Russian envoy to NATO, Alexander Grushko, for the Russian public television station Rossiya24 were the first official Russian reactions after the summit. The tone of Zakharova's first statement was quite emotional and critical (NATO's decisions to reinforce its eastern flank were branded unreasonable, NATO was accused of 'demonising Russia' and distracting attention away from NATO's moves which have a 'destructive effect' on security and of upsetting the strategic balance by building the missile defence system). However, the statement also included a suggestion that Russia is ready for dialogue with NATO, including at a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) on an ambassadorial level on 13 July (the statement insisted that NATO should give "detailed explanations" regarding the decisions taken during the Warsaw summit), and a call for NATO to respond to the 'Niinistö Plan.' Zakharova added in her 12 July statement that NATO's decisions to reinforce its eastern flank should be the main topic of the NRC's meeting. She announced that Russia would initiate a discussion on the 'Niinistö Plan' and also raise the issue of the 'risk to European security' resulting from the continuation of the construction of NATO's missile defence system in Europe (launcher bases in Romania and Poland). Other issues to be discussed mentioned are: the conflict in Ukraine, the situation in Afghanistan and terrorist threats.

Zakharova's theses were reiterated in a more detailed version by Mr Grushko: in the interview, he criticised NATO's decisions to strengthen its eastern flank, putting forward a rather absurd thesis that these decisions would mean those countries became a focus of Russia's military planning, which had not previously been the case. He also announced that Russia would be forced to take defensive military action to "bring back balance […] on the borders which have now become NATO borders" (*sic*). He also expressed his conviction that statements contained in the summit's final decision (critical of Russia) would not affect further Russian-US co-operation in Syria. However, Grushko criticised NATO for its military support package for Ukraine, concluding that NATO supported the "war party" in Kyiv.

The Russian tactic: a moderate reaction while waiting for a strategic breakthrough

The fact that it was decided in Warsaw that NATO's eastern flank should be further reinforced (starting from 2017) will not bring any fundamental change to the existing substantial asymmetry (to Russia's advantage) in conventional forces in this region. However, this will be another important political step made by the USA and NATO in questioning the buffer zone in Central and Eastern Europe which was in fact stipulated by Russia. Even though the number of the forces deployed is rather small, this will also

essentially increase the likelihood of direct military engagement by the USA and NATO in case of a military threat from Russia to the countries on NATO's eastern flank, and Moscow will have to take this into consideration in its military planning.

In this context, the Warsaw summit is a success for NATO (and especially for the countries on its eastern flank) and a defeat for Russia, which has been unable to divide the alliance or to overly water down its decisions, including by means of offers of dialogue. Russian reactions following the summit indicate that Moscow has decided to choose a rather soft response tactic. Therefore, the most likely scenario at this moment is that Russia will not take any overly aggressive action in the coming months and will rather attempt to influence the policy of the key NATO member states (the USA, Germany and France) by making moves aimed at de-escalating the tension (including talks on a possible deal on avoiding military incidents). It will thus reinforce the efforts of those NATO member states (such as France and Germany) which will make efforts to employ a more intensive dialogue with Moscow in order to 'compensate' it somehow for the decisions made at the Warsaw summit. Proof of this includes the Kremlin's communiqué concerning a telephone conversation between President Putin, the German chancellor Angela Merkel and the French president François Hollande on 13 July, stating that the parties "expressed mutual desire to pursue constructive dialogue and take concrete steps to strengthen confidence between Russia and NATO

The NATO-US missile defence system project is a potentially essential element of consolidating the US presence on NATO's eastern flank. Therefore, the attempt to set back the implementation of this project, and in particular the construction of Redzikowo base (the Deveselu base in Romania has already been put into operation) under the pretext of that the threat posed by Iran has dropped back and Moscow's concerns that the system might be transformed into an offensive one, will be Russia's strategically important goal in the coming months-year. The Kremlin evidently pins great hopes on Donald Trump's possible victory in the US presidential election in November this year (he is viewed in Russia as a politician who is ready to strike a strategic deal with Russia on mutual respect of interests and to reduce US engagement in Europe, including in the area of security). It is precisely this hope which is an important factor preventing the Kremlin from taking a harsher military response to the decisions taken during the Warsaw summit (this has been pointed out, for example, in the statement made on 8 July by Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the Federation Council's committee for foreign affairs, who suggested that a change of the government elite in the USA and Europe would in fact cancel the decisions made during the Warsaw summit).

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Appendix
Russia's military activity– the desire to maintain a strategic advantage

Since the end of 2015 Russia has been announcing and implementing its plan to strengthen the military potential of the Western Military District (consisting of around 300,000 soldiers) and the Southern Military District:

- The decision to change the organisational structure of the Western Military District was taken towards the end of 2015. New tactical compounds were created as part of it: 1st Guards Tank Army (it includes subdivisions of the 2nd Tamanskaya Motor Rifle Division and the 4th Kantemirovskaya Tank Division) and the 20th Guards Army (headquartered in Voronezh).
- In early January 2016, the Russian Defence Ministry announced that, considering the increasing presence of NATO troops close to Russia's borders, three new divisions would be created in both military districts. They would consist of existing brigades reinforced with new units to be stationed to the south-east of Smolensk next to the Belarusian border (Yelnya in Smolensk Oblast) and next to the Ukrainian border (Boguchar in Voronezh Oblast and Novocherkassk in Rostov Oblast). The units are expected to achieve military readiness by mid 2017. The ministry revealed in June this year that the 23rd Separate Motor Rifle Brigade (Valuyki, Belgorod Oblast) and the 28th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade (Klintsy, Bryansk Oblast) had already been deployed on the western flank.
- The launch of restructuring of the units' command system in Kaliningrad Oblast, where the 11th Army Corps has been formed and will include the ground units, including missile brigades, which so far have reported to the Baltic Fleet, was announced in May 2016. The fact that this corps has been created may signify a change in the operational plans in which the launch of offensive actions is considered.
- The offensive potential is still being reinforced in the Black Sea region. To achieve this, Bastion anti-ship missile systems have been deployed and two missile ships equipped with cruise missiles from the Kalibr family are the new addition to the Black Sea Fleet.

Already before the NATO summit began, minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu, speaking during the meeting of the senior staff at the Ministry of Defence on 29 June, commented that NATO's new defence initiatives would meet with an adequate response. He announced that the reinforcement of military structures in the western strategic direction was to continue. He added that the US's deployment of elements of the missile defence system in Romania and Poland and the fact that this infrastructure might be used to install Tomahawk cruise missiles remained the greatest threat from the point of view of Russia's security. He announced that by the end of this year the Western Military District would be reinforced with 10,000 soldiers and 2,000 pieces of military equipment, without specifying precisely what kind of equipment this would be. He provided assurances that the Russian army was prepared to immediately redeploy Iskander missile systems in Kaliningrad Oblast. Shoygu's statement did not contain any new elements that could suggest a possible revisions of the previous guidelines of the plan for the development and modernisation of the military potential of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. These statements were intended to apply psychological pressure on NATO and its member states ahead of the Warsaw summit.

Maintaining the combat readiness of offensive measures (Iskander missile systems, the air force and navy) that are potentially dangerous to NATO infrastructure located close to Russian borders is essential for Russia's policy towards NATO. The Russian units deployed

on the western flank are still given top priority as regards receiving new military equipment. According to the Ministry of Defence, the personnel professionalisation ratio (contract soldiers) will reach 80% in 2017. The air and missile defence module is also being strengthened. S400 missile systems are supplied to units, and co-operation with the Belarusian army is also being developed in order to improve the interoperability of the two armies. For example, exercises of Belarusian and Russian airmobile troops at the training grounds near Vitebsk and Brest took place in the period preceding the NATO summit.

The fact that the minister of defence announced the dismissal of the commander and tens of senior officers of the Baltic Fleet proves that the plan of the rapid deployment of new units on the western flank has run into some organisational problems. The dismissed officers were charged with willingly misleading the ministry's senior officials about the progress in the development of military infrastructure and with stealing money from the budget. The dismissal of the Baltic Fleet's command is proof of difficulties in carrying out the tasks linked to the reorganisation of the Baltic Fleet's structures. Improving combat capabilities entails the need to quickly develop, for example, the social facilities for the personnel. This process, linked to the decisions made in January 2016, given the short period assigned for the implementation of the plans, has faced financial and logistical problems. However, the above mentioned personnel crisis in the Baltic Fleet will not seriously affect its combat capabilities. Proof of this include the high training activity of the units, the constant presence of the forces in Baltic Sea waters and the possibility of the quick redeployment of additional units (for example, Iskander missile systems) from distant locations in Russia. Given this context, issues linked to developing social facilities are of minor importance.

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