



**WAR WITH NATO:
ESSENCE OF A RUSSIAN DECISION**

Dr Jeffrey H. Michaels¹

April 2019

INTRODUCTION

For the last five years the Russian military threat to NATO has received a great deal of attention but I would argue that all too often the focus is misguided and there is a surreal quality to much of the discussion. Scenarios of potential Russian aggression are now a prominent feature of the NATO discourse and have served as the basis for recent changes to the policies and military structures of the Alliance and many of its members. Regrettably, these scenarios are often taken at face value, leading to a superficial, if not actually misleading, appreciation of the nature and character of the ‘threat’ as well as NATO’s own perceived vulnerabilities. The fundamental problem is that there is an undue emphasis on Russian military capabilities whereas there is much less interest in understanding Russian leaders’ ideas about the political utility of military conflict and how they might conceive of military aggression against NATO playing out. The evidence for this overemphasis on capabilities can be found in the numerous NATO-Russia wargames that have been conducted since 2014, as well as in the discourse of policymakers and the expert community when they are discussing ways of dealing with the perceived threat.²

Although most analysts rate the possibility of a Russian military attack against NATO as low, if not *very* low, the consensus of opinion is that it cannot be ruled out completely. After all, NATO’s ‘enhanced forward presence’ in the Baltic states and Poland, as well as other related initiatives, such as the NATO Readiness Initiative, otherwise known as the 30-30-30-30 plan, have been publicly justified as a

¹ Defence Studies Department, King’s College London. Dr. Michaels was a Visiting Fellow at CCW from September 2016 to July 2017. © 2018 Changing Character of War Centre. All rights reserved. Material in this publication is copyrighted under UK law. Individual authors reserve all rights to their work and material should not be reproduced without their prior permission. The views and opinions expressed in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Changing Character of War Centre, Pembroke College, or the University of Oxford.

² Since 2014, NATO policy discussions about what to do about Russia often include the following type of arguments with their embedded assumptions about Russian behavior: We need to buy A because they have B and can use it to do C; or, we need to station X number of troops in or near Y because they could seize it too easily if we do not.

deterrent against the prospect of Russian aggression.³ Put simply, for many NATO members Russia looks menacing today in a way that it did not 10, 15 or 25 years ago.⁴ On the one hand, this sense of renewed threat has to do with its aggressive actions in Ukraine, its military role in Syria, and the greatly intensified scope and sophistication of its subversive activities in recent years. The quality of the Russian military has also improved remarkably and the system that exists today is almost unrecognizable from that which existed in the 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s. Its military exercises are conducted on a scale which NATO can only envy, with some concerns expressed, for instance during the Zapad-2017 exercises, that they could be used as a cover for war.⁵ Exaggerated as such concerns may be, that this prospect has been taken seriously at all, and the amount of Western interest taken in these and similar Russian military exercises, is indicative of the fears they have generated. A wide spectrum of views now exists on the severity of the Russian military threat, with analysts arguing over the extent to which Russia's forces compare with those of NATO, typically focusing on such factors as quality and numbers of equipment and personnel. Yet these factors only acquire meaning through scenarios in which different types of conflict are considered, and in some scenarios, Russia looks, on the surface at least, particularly menacing. So long as this is the case, it is only prudent to think about the prospect of a Russia-NATO clash, if for no other reason than to take measures to reduce the possibility further still – for instance, by increasing the effectiveness of one's own deterrent, improving indications and warning, and avoiding actions that will increase the risk of conflict.⁶

Within NATO today, there is a lack of consensus on the 'Russia threat' with at least three positions identifiable.⁷ At one end of the spectrum, Russia is seen more as a nuisance and competitor than posing

³ This point was reiterated, for instance, by NATO SACEUR General Curtis Scaparrotti: 'But what four battalions is, is an actual deterrent to any aggression by Russia with respect to the boundaries of the NATO alliance'. Cited in: "NATO Commander: Baltic Presence 'Necessary' To Stop Russian 'Aggression'," *RFE/RL*, 12 July 2018. See also: 'Reinforcing NATO's Deterrence in the East', NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Defence and Security Committee, General Rapporteur Joseph A. Day, 17 November 2018.

⁴ Prior to 2014, some NATO members showed an increasing level of concern about Russia. Most notably, in the aftermath of the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, and at the time of the ZAPAD-2009 exercises, the Baltic states pushed for the Alliance to develop contingency plans for the region's defense. See for instance: Scott Shane, 'NATO Balanced Baltic and Russian Anxieties', *The New York Times*, 6 December 2010. However, after 2014, the level of concern among other NATO members markedly increased. A useful description of US defense thinking related to this point can be found in: Julia Ioffe, 'Exclusive: The Pentagon is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle against Russia', *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2015.

⁵ Simon Saradzhyan, '100,000 troops will engage in Russia's Zapad-2017 war games', *Washington Post*, 13 September 2017; Andrea Shalal, 'US general says allies worry Russian war game may be "Trojan horse"', *Reuters*, 20 July 2017; Mike Eckel, 'Know Your Enemy: Russian War Games Expected to Yield Valuable Insight for Western Watchers', *RFE/RL*, 10 September 2017.

⁶ For a discussion of this point, see: Andrew Radin, 'How NATO Could Accidentally Trigger a War with Russia', *The National Interest*, 11 November 2017. As Dmitri Trenin recently observed in relation to the US and Russia: 'Both defense establishments consider a US-Russian war a possibility and are preparing for it... While Russians see American scenarios of a Russian attack against the Baltics or Poland as preposterous, Americans view any notion of a US-led invasion of Russia as absurd. Expecting the worst from one's adversary leads to the adoption of strategies and postures, including in the nuclear field, that appear reassuring to the party employing them, but may look provocative to the opponent'. See his: 'Russian Views of US Nuclear Modernization', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 2019, p. 14

⁷ Peter Viggo Jakobsen & Jens Ringsmose, 'Victim of its own success: how NATO's difficulties are caused by the absence of a unifying existential threat', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 16, No.1, 2018, pp. 38-58. In December 2017, the Oxford Changing Character of War Centre hosted a workshop examining the policy positions of the UK, France, Germany, Poland and Romania in the run-up to the 2016 Warsaw Summit, including how each country viewed the Russia 'threat' and the means to respond to it. The papers presented at the workshop can be found at: https://www.spf.org/gff/projects/project_24052.html

a physical threat. Military invasion is viewed as so improbable as to be effectively impossible. By comparison, other threats emanating from different regions of the world are deemed more clear and present dangers. In the middle of the spectrum are those countries who are mainly concerned about Russia's subversive activities. Whilst not willing to completely dismiss the threat of Russian military aggression, their efforts to strengthen NATO's conventional defences are mainly motivated by such objectives as promoting Alliance solidarity, reassuring those Allies that are deemed to be most exposed, and as part of a bureaucratic role re-adjustment following the large-scale military drawdown from Afghanistan. Finally, there are those countries located closer to Russia who are obliged to take the threat more seriously. They probably do not think an invasion is imminent, but they do see it as a more realistic prospect than most of their fellow Alliance members. Within each country, there will of course be a range of opinions, but for the most part, the national policy positions adopted by NATO members tend to fall into these categories. Thus, despite a general consensus that the Russian military is significantly more capable than it once was, the important debate revolves around what this means for NATO's security.

Unfortunately, absent from this debate is any systematic effort to ascertain under what circumstances Russia would switch from its long-standing policy of avoiding a military clash with NATO to one where it decides to wage the sort of military aggression that has featured recently in many scenarios. It is my intention to expand the boundaries of what I consider to be the unnecessarily narrow range of debate, and to encourage other scholars and practitioners, particularly those with a direct or indirect interest in this issue, to challenge the accepted wisdom and ask more penetrating questions than have been asked to date. To be clear, it is not my intention to produce a general theory of war initiation decision-making, which, given that the subject with which I am dealing is of a war that has not taken place, would be ambitious.

Instead, the aim is to call attention to the problems of war initiation decision-making in a specific hypothetical case that represents one of NATO's most pressing policy concerns. It will do so by highlighting what sort of issues Russian decision-makers would probably have to address should they ever choose to pursue a military confrontation. This is of relevance to gaining a broader appreciation about the likelihood of action, but also useful for informing policies that are intended to further reduce the possibility of conflict. I will not take any position for or against NATO's current defense posture and policy initiatives with respect to deterrence, or to argue that NATO should strengthen or weaken its presence on the 'eastern flank'. Rather, I will limit myself to pointing out that the merits and drawbacks of the existing posture and policies cannot be properly assessed without a wider appreciation of the issues and dilemmas that would face Russian policymakers confronted with a decision to go to war with NATO.

To address these issues, this paper is divided into two substantive sections. The first section examines a number of Cold War and post-Cold War scenarios from both war games as well as scholarly works dealing with a potential NATO-Soviet/Russian conflict to identify shortcomings in their assumptions about decisions of war initiation. The reason for approaching the subject in this way is that, by its very nature, the issue at hand is one of speculation about an adversary's behaviour in conflicts that have yet to occur. Therefore, it is useful to gain a general understanding of what usually is emphasized and what is marginalized when this issue has been addressed by practitioners and scholars in the past. As will be shown, discussion of war initiation decisions have traditionally been marginalized, which has served to hinder understanding of the topic. Even for scholarly works that have examined Soviet and Russian military affairs, particularly those addressing doctrine, capabilities and Command and Control, too little attention is devoted to decision-making at the political-military level. In this paper, I will argue that, from an analytical point of view, a top-down approach that emphasizes relevant inputs in the lead-up to a decision to undertake military aggression should be essential for NATO when weighing alternative policy prescriptions for dealing with this potential prospect. The second half of the paper seeks to draw attention to some relevant aspects of the decision-making process and asks a number of questions that any Russian leadership would almost certainly need to address before making any final decisions about attacking NATO. In the course of doing so, it will highlight areas where it might be possible to influence any decisions to ensure that they are never made.

THINKING ABOUT WAR INITIATION DECISIONS IN A NATO-RUSSIA CONTEXT

To be clear, again, it is not my purpose here to make the case that Russia has any intent to attack NATO. Instead, I merely wish to explore the complex set of issues any Russian leadership would face if confronted with that decision. The principal question I will be addressing is: how should we think about the prospect of Russian military aggression against NATO?⁸ It is essential to have a clearer idea of the

⁸ A list of NATO definitions from the Cold War of different types of Soviet aggression is useful for context here. According to MC 14/3 (FINAL), 16 January 1968: "Limited Aggression – is defined as any armed attack against NATO forces or territory, or actions at sea or in the air, under conditions of self-imposed military restraint, in which it appears that an armed attack imperils neither the survival of nation(s) nor the integrity of military forces as indicated in paragraph 7a and b, below. Restraints include voluntary restriction on the objective sought, the areas involved and on the weapons and forces used by the enemy. Limited aggression is considered to include overt incursions and hostile local actions." Incursions are defined as "Small-scale raids, frontier violations, or other harassments on land, at sea and in the air carried out by Soviet, Satellite or other aggressive military or paramilitary units with the apparent intention to generate disorder, tension, confusions, or to reconnoitre." Hostile local actions are defined as "Military actions conducted in an atmosphere suggesting conscious restriction by the adversary on the objectives, nature and duration of operations and on the manpower and weapons he employs. In initiation of these hostile local actions, it is considered that reliance would be placed on the quick thrust and, if objectives were quickly realised, on the assumed reluctance of NATO to restore the situation by force and thereby risk broadening the scope of the incident. According to paragraph 7a and b: "Major Aggression – is defined as any nuclear or non-nuclear armed attack against NATO forces or territory, or actions at sea or in the air, in which it has been clearly determined that the aim and scope of an armed attack are such as to imperil, directly, either: a. One or more NATO countries, to the extent that survival as free and independent nation(s) is immediately at stake, or b. The integrity of military forces, to the extent that capabilities essential to the effective accomplishment of NATO strategic objectives are imminently subject to unacceptable deterioration. Available online at:

characteristics of a Russian decision to initiate military aggression against NATO. The approach taken here is unorthodox in that it avoids direct engagement with mainstream political science works dealing with the related subjects of war initiation, deterrence, the role of alliances, the waning of major war, nor does it directly engage with the literature on competing theories of International Relations. Though I will draw on some of this literature, and make a few indirect references to it, the principal aim is to narrow the focus from that of general theory towards understanding how certain issues may present themselves in this specific context.

The reason for taking this approach has to do with the limitations that are readily apparent when too much reliance is placed on structural ideas about war initiation. A good example highlighting the dangers of letting ideology structurally determine notions of war initiation can be found in the Cold War scenarios designed by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact in which NATO was the aggressor.⁹ In several major Soviet/Warsaw Pact military exercises that were conducted in the 1970s, NATO aggression is motivated by the desire to seize East Germany, and possibly Czechoslovakia and Poland as well.¹⁰ These scenarios were predicated on the idea that as the Capitalists/Imperialists were, by their very nature, aggressive, and the Communists defensive, it automatically followed that NATO would attack the Warsaw Pact.¹¹ The complex issues and processes associated with NATO decision-making were therefore mostly irrelevant.

By contrast, upon hearing the idea that NATO would attack the Warsaw Pact, anyone familiar with the Alliance would almost certainly dismiss it out of hand as being absurd. Even accounting for the fact that NATO developed contingency plans associated with the defense of West Berlin that included the option of up to a Corps-level advance into East Germany,¹² such were the political realities within NATO that these plans were never really seen as practicable due to the limited prospect of gaining Allied consensus. More generally, the lack of Western appetite for invading Soviet-held territory was fairly consistent since the end of World War II. As early as 1945, British plans for a Western coalition to attack Soviet forces in an effort to reverse Soviet gains in Eastern Europe were regarded with a great deal of

<https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a680116a.pdf>

⁹ See, for instance, discussion of this in: 'Warsaw Pact Commentary on NATO Concepts for War in Central Europe', CIA/NFAC/OSR Intelligence Assessment, October 1977. Available at:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/5196457b993294098d509498>

¹⁰ Some specific examples include: CIA Intelligence Information Special Report, Background Scenario for Exercise "Zapad [West]-77" on 31 May 1977, 15 September 1977; CIA Intelligence Information Special Report, Exercise "LATO-74" – A Nuclear War Scenario, 20 October 1978; CIA Intelligence Information Special Report, Warsaw Pact "Shield-76", 23 December 1976; CIA Intelligence Information Special Report, Warsaw Pact Exercise "CENTER" Far Eastern Theater of Operations, Installation "ALBATROSS", 8 June 1979.

¹¹ Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne, *A Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact, 1955-1991* (New York: Central European University Press, 2005), pp. 21-23

¹² See reference to BERCON CHARLIE FOUR in this 1962 document on SHAPE Berlin Contingency Planning: SGPO 29/62. Office of the Standing Group Representative. Memorandum by the Standing Group Representative Lieutenant General Guerin to the Secretary General on Berlin Contingency Planning SHAPE 70/62 (30 March 1962) ENG. Available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_archives/19620330-DP-SGPO_29_62-ENG.pdf

skepticism by military planners. Churchill's aptly named 'Operation Unthinkable', which aimed to conduct a limited war against the Soviet Union to get a 'square deal for Poland', was rejected on many grounds, among them that there was little expectation that such a war could be kept limited, nor was it likely to receive support from the US Government upon which its execution depended.¹³ Irrespective of any hostile intent on the part of Churchill towards the USSR, one had to distinguish between fanciful plans and reality. The lack of any NATO intervention during the 1956 Hungarian and 1968 Czechoslovak crises should have given Soviet policymakers sufficient confidence that there was little Western interest in risking a major conflagration.

Despite this record of non-intervention, by the early 1980s, the view of key Soviet leaders that the US and its NATO allies would launch a surprise attack – probably based on gloomy Soviet computations of the global 'correlation of forces' – led them to think this was a realistic possibility, particularly at the time of NATO's 1983 ABLE ARCHER exercise.¹⁴ Clearly, the Soviets failed to appreciate the complicated dynamics of US and NATO decision-making. Yet unless one understands the specifics of decision-making processes, the preferences of the decision-makers themselves, especially the limits they place on their actions, and the range of decisions that would need to be made before a war could be initiated, relying on abstract theories and reductionist attitudes about the inherently hostile nature of one's adversary is of little use to understanding the context in which military aggression is likely.

Analytical Approaches

In terms of what I consider to be misguided frames of reference dominating analysis of the contemporary 'Russia threat', I offer an illustration from the Cold War, what I refer to as the 'Vigor-Close Spectrum of Soviet Blitzkrieg Theory Analysis'. At one end of the spectrum sat Peter Vigor, head of the Soviet Studies Research Centre at Sandhurst. In his 1983 book, *Soviet Blitzkrieg Theory*, he described the importance the Soviets placed on surprise, why this would be essential in any Soviet aggression against NATO, and he then laid out a detailed scenario in which the Soviet Union successfully carries out a surprise attack on NATO forces in West Germany. In Vigor's scenario, NATO's initial defences are overwhelmed and the narrative ends with the conflict still in progress.¹⁵

¹³ See chapter 7 on 'The Bitter Fruit of Victory: Churchill and an Unthinkable Operation, 1945' in David Dilks, *Churchill and Company: Allies and Rivals in War and Peace* (I. B. Tauris, 2012), p. 215.

¹⁴ Nate Jones (ed) *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War* (New York: New Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Despite my 'critique' here of Vigor's *Soviet Blitzkrieg Theory* as being too focused on the 'operational level', it is important to note that he did address elsewhere the issue of Soviet conceptions about the utility of war, most notably in his *The Soviet View of War, Peace and Neutrality* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul 1975). To the extent that I have singled out Vigor, it is only to demonstrate what top experts on the Soviet military tended to focus on, and the sort of issues, identified here as being critical, that they tended not to raise in their analyses. To give one further example, see Vigor's 'Doubts and Difficulties Confronting a Would-be Soviet Attacker', *The RUSI Journal*, 125:2, 1980, pp. 32-38. This piece dealt entirely with practical issues, especially those related to the Soviets trying to achieve strategic surprise, and whilst noting the Soviet reluctance to engage in a war with NATO, avoids discussion of Soviet objectives in a possible war.

This focus on operational and technical military matters is similar to that which dominates contemporary discussion of the Russia threat. What the ultimate military objective, much less the political objective of the Soviet attack was supposed to be, is never discussed. Moreover, attention is placed on the 'line-of-advance', not the 'end-of-the-advance'.¹⁶ Vigor was scarcely alone in designing his scenario in this way. This sort of approach constituted the mainstream of analysis of Soviet military affairs and is particularly evident in American intelligence assessments throughout the Cold War period. It also served as the assumption for much of the West's defence planning. A NATO-Warsaw Pact military clash is essentially treated as the 'end time'. In this respect, a Soviet decision to invade Western Europe was not only a point of no return in the immediate sense, but also, presumably, for humanity more generally, given the likely prospect of nuclear escalation. As a result, there was an absence of thinking, especially from the early 1950s onwards, about intra-war diplomacy, cease-fires, and resumption of hostilities at a later date so that the war duration was conceived as lasting hours, days or weeks rather than the World War II experience of a conflict lasting years. Moreover, the very term 'World War III' tended to dominate the discourse even though there was every possibility that conflict might be confined to a discrete area.

On the other side of the spectrum was the Belgian General Robert Close. His controversial 1976 book, *Europe Without Defense: 48 Hours that Could Change the Face of the World*,¹⁷ also discusses how the Soviets would conduct a surprise attack and focused heavily on operational and technical military matters. Unlike Vigor, however, who started with the capabilities – in other words, this is how the Soviets would use their military capabilities in the most effective way to defeat the NATO defenders – so very much a bottom-up approach, Close took a top-down approach. What Close did was to ask the questions of what are the Soviet Union's foreign policy objectives, under what circumstances would a war against NATO help them to achieve those goals, and how would those goals determine how the war was to be conducted and the means to be employed – thus who would be involved, how far would they go, what limits would be placed on the military planners when designing their campaign, and how would the military action be complemented with diplomacy to achieve the political objective. For Close, the Soviets would approach a war with NATO as essentially a point along the road in the evolution of global geopolitics, leading to a new international status quo.

¹⁶ In fairness, Soviet/Warsaw Pact exercises were not clear on this point either. Two examples from the 1970s highlight this. In one exercise, NATO makes an initial penetration of some 200 km, and then the war finishes at day 51 with Warsaw Pact forces 100 km away from the Spanish border. In another exercise, after NATO forces gain control of Poland and Czechoslovakia they are driven back to the western border of the FRG. See respectively: CIA Intelligence Information Special Report, Warsaw Pact Exercise "CENTER" Far Eastern Theater of Operations, Installation "ALBATROSS", 8 June 1979; CIA Intelligence Information Special Report, Warsaw Pact "Shield-76", 23 December 1976.

¹⁷ At the time of its publication, Close was serving as the Deputy Commandant of the NATO Defence College.

Whilst many aspects of Close's book were heavily criticized,¹⁸ that sort of approach, where we ask ourselves what would be the point of Russian aggression against NATO, how would political considerations shape the 'who, what, when, where, why and how' of military action – this is not the approach that has received much attention in the contemporary debate on the 'Russia threat'. And yet, would not Russian decision-makers, faced with the decision to initiate military action against NATO be obliged to deal with some or all of these questions?

War and Decisions for War

Although it may seem self-evident, the relationship between 'war' and a 'decision for war' requires some elaboration. After all, it could be argued that to speak in terms of decision-making implies a rational process with a clear chain of command. This is reflected in the mainstream or traditional view of an individual or group that is authorized to issue orders to initiate military action, having deliberated on a course of action, weighed the costs and benefits, and decided accordingly. An alternative view, what might be termed 'sleepwalking', holds that wars begin by accident, with little forethought, often amidst a crisis that is spiraling out of control. In the course of the crisis, one thing leads to the next, accidents can occur, as do minor incidents that, tit for tat, lead to the triggering of more substantive military action that no one really intended or wanted to happen. In these circumstances, emotion rather than reason drives policy.

Two problems with this view quickly become apparent. Even in the midst of the crisis, regardless of the pressure placed on policymakers, any decision to 'unleash the dogs of war' must still be taken at some point.¹⁹ Moreover, the circumstances in which that decision would be taken are particularly inauspicious in the sense that the costs of initiating one's war plans with an enemy's forces alerted, and so on, or, worse, without having given much thought to what is the purpose of the military action – and which may differ from longstanding war plans, or the assumptions underpinning them – is more likely to result in a meaningless slaughter and political catastrophe. Therefore, whereas one cannot rule out the prospect of a decision for war amidst a major crisis – clearly there have been numerous historical instances in which wars have begun in this way – a more profitable line of enquiry is to study the matter from the perspective of ideal conditions, operating based on clear ideas about goals and methods to achieve them.

Another fundamental problem that structures, or as I would argue, *wrongly* structures, the vast majority of analyses dealing with decisions for war, particularly those of future rather than past wars, are the

¹⁸ See for instance: Lawrence Freedman's review in *International Affairs*, Volume 56, Issue 3, 1 July 1980, p. 522.

¹⁹ 'The instant of initiation, the specific event triggering the eruption of violence, may be a surprise or even an accident, but it occurs in a context of prior planning and preparation that can leave no doubt that the inauguration of a conflict serious enough to become a war has been carefully calculated'. Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 4

assumptions of the inputs to that decision, or more precisely, to the *series of decisions* that lead to war. For our purposes here, I will simply label this problem as the 'battlefield mindset', which limits itself to consideration of those factors affecting the battlefield – plans, mobilization, movement, system performance, logistics, command and control, and so on.²⁰ This mindset either excludes or downplays the overarching role of political and non-military factors, such as the purpose and scope of military action, relations with other states, the economy, social, moral/ethical, legal and other issues. By contrast, a mindset that does give sufficient, if not overriding weight to these other non-military factors, might be termed the 'war mindset'.

Which mindset prevails at the time a key decision or decisions must be made? For a historical investigator this sort of determination can best be made through an examination of relevant evidence – such as minutes of high-level meetings or the recollections of key participants. Based on the substance of the evidence, even if one could not make a determination that this or that factor was more important, what is crucial is that there is evidence that non-military factors significantly shaped military action, that decision-makers considered these other factors in the course of their deliberations, even if they ultimately chose to subordinate or downplay them relative to the military factors. From even a superficial study of the decisions about war by modern states, one is immediately struck by the significant gap between the assumptions of those who develop military scenarios and those of the policymakers who must decide whether or not to commit to war.²¹

That such a gap exists is unsurprising. When scenarios are devised, they are usually crafted by individuals or small teams, working in far from ideal circumstances, being unfamiliar with the precise circumstances, individuals, consultation mechanisms, bureaucratic procedures, etc. of the adversary they are assuming will start a war. Often many other motives, particularly those associated with crafting these scenarios for specific institutional purposes, for instance, to test doctrinal concepts, are also likely to limit the scenario's realism. Whilst there are natural limits to the crafting of any scenario of this sort, I would suggest that an approach that embodies a more holistic 'war mindset' will come much closer to the reality of historical experience than one limited to a 'battlefield mindset'.²²

²⁰ For an extreme example of this phenomenon as it relates to a Russian invasion of Estonia and Latvia, described by the author as a 'coup de main scenario over one week', see: Ben S. Wermeling, 'Fighting Russia? Modeling the Baltic Scenarios', *Parameters*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Summer 2018, pp. 63-75. It is important to stress that the problem of a lack of clear political-strategic direction leaving a void to be filled at the operational level has a long history, and was particularly evident in Afghanistan. See for instance: Hew Strachan, 'Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War', *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 5, 2010, pp. 157-182.

²¹ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

²² My inspiration for this point derived from: Lawrence Freedman, 'A Theory of Battle or a Theory of War?' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 28:3, 2005, pp. 425-435.

In the course of making a decision to initiate hostilities, and typically embedded in war plans and military preparations, there exists a set of assumptions that can be termed a 'theory of victory'. Essentially this is a cognitive script outlining how a military system, or more likely the full apparatus of a state, can achieve victory over an adversary in a war. Depending on the circumstances of who devises the scripts, such theories can bear a close relation to reality, or little relation to reality; they can be crafted in a sophisticated way, or an unsophisticated way – but regardless, the existence of some form of script is assumed, as this is the basis for the idea of a rational approach to war in contrast to the unleashing of completely irrational violence with no objectives and no sense of how to defeat the enemy.²³

If we can therefore assume a relationship exists between a 'decision for war' and a 'theory of victory', we might further speculate that a decision for war is more likely to result when decision-makers are highly confident in their theory of victory, whereas they are almost certain to be more hesitant, or to decide against war, when they have little or no confidence in their theory of victory, assuming they can devise one in the first place. Efforts by the defender to thwart, or deter, the plans of the aggressor, must therefore be aimed at undermining this 'theory of victory', with the ultimate purpose of undermining the leadership's confidence in it. Undermining it can involve any number of actions in a variety of realms. For instance, if the theory of victory is highly dependent on securing a particular physical objective, then efforts to increase the defenses to deny, delay or increase the costs of attaining that objective, and communicating this to the adversary, might force the adversary to hesitate by increasing their cost and risk assessment.

A Russian 'Theory of Victory' over NATO?

Before one can undermine an adversary's 'theory of victory', it must first be identified. In the topic under discussion here, the question therefore becomes, what is the Russian theory of victory over NATO? This leads to a further question, how would the Russian leadership define a victory over NATO? Answering this 'ends' question is a pre-requisite for attempting to answer what 'ways' and 'means' they would use to achieve it. On the other hand, a case can be made that the 'ends' will be determined by the 'ways' and 'means', and therefore, if one has a general, if not specific, knowledge of the forces involved, how they are equipped, how they are postured, how they conduct operations, etc. then one can more or less make out what the ends are based on what is deemed to be physically possible.

²³ For instance, Barry Posen attempts to outline the Serbian 'theory of victory' during the 1999 conflict with NATO. See his: 'The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy', *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000), pp. 39–84.

That this approach is inadequate, however, should become immediately apparent. Take for instance a hypothetical Russian Army brigade positioned adjacent to a NATO member state. In theory it might advance into NATO territory until it can advance no more due to logistical overstretch, physical breakdown, opposition from an enemy force, or a physical barrier such as the English Channel. Or, one could suggest that based on Russian military doctrine, that brigade is expected to occupy X amount of territory, or advance across Y amount of frontage at a rate of Z miles per day, or is expected to overcome an enemy force with a ratio of 3:1, and so forth. This 'military-scientific' approach does have some utility, namely in ruling out a number of options. For example, one would assume that a single Russian brigade would not disregard its doctrine, as well as common sense, by attacking an adversary that is ten times stronger than itself. The limited utility of this approach should mean that it is only used to augment, rather than be used in place of, an approach focused on determining the ends first and working backwards to assess the ways and means.

To return to the question of how the Russian leadership would define a victory over NATO, one can identify a range of options, and narrow this down to a smaller number of plausible alternatives, by accounting for, among other things, the general actions to be taken (e.g. land invasion, air attack, sea attack), the goals (e.g. dissolution of NATO, humiliation of NATO, occupy territory for unrelated reasons, decoupling US military power from Europe), conflict duration (short-term or long-term), the likely geography, and the limits of action (e.g. no national mobilization, no escalation to nuclear weapons, action limited to particular fronts). In addition to this basic list, one can add any number of other considerations that have historically influenced ideas of victory. In short, one must attempt to replicate the range of options and cost-benefit calculus of the Russian leadership. Based upon this, one then asks under what circumstances would the Russian leadership calculate a victory would be possible, if not probable, and rule out those where defeat was probable, if not certain. The following discussion will address a number of these points in greater detail.

Consider the now (in)famous 2016 RAND wargame report, based on gaming conducted in 2014 and 2015.²⁴ Russian forces, consisting of some 27 maneuver battalions of the Western Military District are involved, and the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga are reached in, at most, 60 hours (H+60). According to the scenario, the strategic goal of the invasion is to 'demonstrate NATO's inability to protect its most vulnerable members and divide the alliance, reducing the threat it presents from Moscow's point of view'.

²⁴ Daniel A. *Shlapak* and Michael W. Johnson, '*Reinforcing Deterrence* on NATO's Eastern Flank', RAND Corporation, 2016.

Several obvious questions present themselves. Why 27 maneuver battalions – as opposed to 5 or 50?²⁵ Why Tallinn and Riga, as opposed to Tallinn *or* Riga or something else? Why would the Russians believe a military attack on NATO would divide the Alliance, as opposed to do the precise opposite? And if the goal is to divide the Alliance, are there not cheaper, less risky, ways of doing so? On this point, Michael Kofman critiqued the RAND wargame, complaining:

It makes little sense that Russia would invade and conquer the Baltic states to demonstrate NATO's weakness. There is no logical connection between the strategic objective and the operation simulated. Moscow can handily demonstrate the alliance's weakness without invasion and occupation ... This is problem one both for RAND's wargame and the wider debate — no one can intelligently articulate the benefits of such potential actions for the Russians.²⁶

Moreover, what sort of new world order, or more specifically Euro-/Trans-Atlantic security order, does Moscow have in mind after that first 60 hours? Do they really believe it will be business as usual at H+61? Instead of placing so much analytical emphasis on the 60 hours of the war, if one is interested in understanding what might cause Russia to initiate military aggression, it is probably more important to grasp what Russian decision-makers have in mind for what occurs at H+61 and thereafter (as well, of course, for what occurs in the lead-up to the commencement of hostilities).

Following the public release in 2016 of the summary of the RAND wargames, several RAND analysts associated with their design provided further details about the assumptions underpinning them.²⁷ Among these assumptions two reasons were listed to explain why Russia might be tempted to go to war: (1) it fears NATO and feels compelled to go to war, finding itself in a similar position to Japan in 1941; (2) it sees an opportunity to achieve a strategic goal, similar to the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein which was justified, by some officials at least, as part of a broader agenda to 'remake' the Middle East. To achieve its goals, Russia would pursue what is described as a *fait accompli* strategy, in which territory is seized and NATO has no choice but to accept it. Therefore, NATO would be 'defeated', leading either to its collapse or to some major concessions on its part. The analysts argued that the premise 'is sufficiently plausible to merit serious planning and examination of how it might play out'. They concluded with the policy recommendation of 'the forward positioning of capable heavy forces able to stand up to Russian counterparts'.

²⁵ Apparently the figure of 27 battalions was chosen on the basis that this is the number Russia could assemble in the time period of the scenario. My thanks to Dave Johnson for this insight.

²⁶ Michael Kofman, 'Fixing NATO Deterrence in the East or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love NATO's Crushing Defeat by Russia', *War on the Rocks*, May 12, 2016.

²⁷ Karl Mueller, David A. Shlapak, Michael W. Johnson and David Ochmanek, 'In Defense of a Wargame: Bolstering Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank', *War on the Rocks*, June 14, 2016; David A. Shlapak, 'The Russian Challenge', RAND Perspective, 2018.

Though it is not my intention to argue with their policy recommendations, I would like to contest the assumptions and 'philosophical' approach underpinning the design of the games, and particularly with the idea of a *fait accompli* strategy. That the RAND analysts are scarcely unique in the way they have approached the design of their scenario. The design of wargames suffer from several inherent weaknesses. As it is a 'wargame', war is inescapable. This means that the decision for war has already been predetermined, and as such, the steps leading up to war are usually of less interest both to the game designers and the game players than the events that occur once the war has begun. Additionally, these games are overly focused on the military aspects of war, with little attention devoted to the non-military aspects, such as the economics of war, legal aspects, the effect on Alliance and domestic politics, nor on measures to prevent the outbreak of war in the first place, beyond that of improving the military ways and means of deterrence. Also, games designed for the policy community are expected to produce policy recommendations. They are not typically designed to produce a better understanding of an adversary's pre-war decision dynamics.

Many of the same problems observable in the RAND games are also evident in most other scenarios that can be found in scholarly works as well as the official discourse. Similar to the Vigor approach, the emphasis is placed on military factors – how Russia might employ its forces to seize territory, what NATO could do to defend itself, how the military forces would fight one another, and the military result after a given period of time. Yet many of the given variables are highly questionable in an actual war, including: the number of forces involved, the war duration, the amount of early warning available to the defenders, the geographic scope of military action, the physical objective and the strategic objective. In the first instance, the linkage between the strategic and physical objective should not be assumed. If it is Russia's goal to present NATO with a *fait accompli*, does it necessarily follow that the seizure of the Baltic states, or the seizure of any NATO territory for that matter, is deemed the most likely way of achieving this outcome? A number of methods can be used to shed light on this question, but probably the most important issue to be addressed is the nature of the *fait accompli* – i.e. as it is a means to an end, then what end is it meant to achieve? If the idea is for X degree of military defeat to lead to the collapse of NATO, or somehow rendering it less threatening than it is otherwise perceived to be, then one would assume the Russian leadership have calculated what degree of defeat would be sufficient for this purpose, which also presupposes that military aggression is deemed the best, or only, means of achieving it.

Is the Russian calculation the same as that of the analysts, game designers, and NATO officials? Here we come to a fundamental flaw of these sorts of scenarios, and their closely related policy recommendations. As one of the key assumptions of the scenarios is that the Baltic states are threatened

by a Russian invasion, presumably on the basis of some broader Russian interest to undermine or eliminate NATO, it is useful to remind ourselves that the threat to the Baltics *may* be seriously considered by Russian policymakers and planners, but regardless of what the Russians may be considering, it is the dominant scenario in NATO's policy and strategy discourse. The distinction here is important, and it is necessary to ask why the Baltic scenario dominates the discourse? I would argue that it is dominant because of the perceived vulnerability of the Baltic states due to their proximity to Russia and because in terms of military force ratios the Russian military is overwhelmingly stronger relative to the militaries of those three states, even when accounting for their augmentation with NATO's 'enhanced forward presence'.

For NATO, interested as it is both in maintaining the territorial integrity of its members, as well as ensuring its own survival, there is a risk of focusing on a single preferred scenario. Why might it make sense for NATO to give more weight to other scenarios? For one thing, it is simply a matter of prudent defence planning. For another, it risks not accounting for the fact that Russian policymakers, even if they had once considered Baltic scenarios as a viable option to defeat NATO, might have been deterred from attacking the Baltic states by NATO's recent efforts to defend them, but nonetheless remain committed to defeat NATO by some other method where there is a greater chance of success. As NATO adapts to counter what it perceives to be the main threat Russia poses, is it not plausible to assume that Russia will adapt as well? Another implication of the scenario preference is what is included as part of the scenario and what is excluded. The RAND game provides a useful illustration of this problem. It is focused squarely on the military aspects and requirements of deterrence and essentially ignores non-military issues altogether. A key consequence of this is that non-military measures to enhance deterrence – both to counter a Russian threat to the Baltics in the first instance and NATO more generally – fail to receive any attention, with policy recommendations restricted to increasing the military presence in the region. This presupposes that in addition to the Russian preference for a Baltic *fait accompli*, that Russian decision-makers would be deterred as a result of the prescribed military measures, as opposed to something else.

What else might deter a Russian decision-maker? The RAND analysts might have considered reframing their scenario in such a way that rather than the key issue being one of denying Russia its physical objective, a more fruitful approach would be to start from the assumption that effective deterrence is about ensuring denial of the adversary's political-strategic objective. This approach is more fruitful because if a physical objective is denied, why would this not lead the adversary to choose an alternative physical objective? By contrast, if the political-strategic objective can be denied regardless of whether or not a physical objective is denied then this would seem to have more value from the perspective of

deterrence. For NATO, it is preferable that any Russian decision-maker know that strategic failure is inevitable despite tactical success, rather than merely casting doubt on the prospect of tactical success. I do not want to focus on the RAND wargame alone, however, because the 'decision for war' problem addressed here is an endemic one in the way these sorts of scenarios are constructed. The same problem is evident in a separate RAND series of wargames positing a NATO-Russia clash over Estonia,²⁸ the 2017 Potomac Foundation Wargame of a contemporary NATO-Russia clash,²⁹ General Shirreff's book on *War with Russia* in 2017,³⁰ and to a large extent this problem was also evident in a number of Cold War fictional scenarios – e.g. General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War* and Tom Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*. Likewise, it is not just with a NATO-Russia conflict that this is a problem. In many of the scenarios that have the US and China clashing, what one typically sees is a clash between US systems versus Chinese systems – but with little thinking about the wider dynamics of the conflict, much less the dynamics of China's decision-making for war.³¹

The Utility of Russian Views

As I have focused thus far on non-Russian ideas about Russian aggression against NATO, an obvious question is to ask how the Russians themselves think about this problem. Answering this requires identifying the relevant Russian 'thinkers'. Four categories would seem to capture the most relevant ones: policymakers, security experts in Russian academia, think tanks and journalism, military fiction writers,³² and the military itself. Of the first three categories I am unaware of any detailed discussion on these matters, and therefore must pass the initiative to other experts more

²⁸ Duncan Long, Terence K. Kelly, and David C. Gompert, *Smarter Power, Stronger Partners, Vol. II: Trends in Force Projection against Potential Adversaries*, RAND, 2017. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1359z1.html

²⁹ The author attended a conference in Warsaw in June 2017 where the design and results of the Potomac Foundation wargame were discussed.

³⁰ Shirreff's fictional narrative of two meetings involving the Kremlin's 'War Cabinet' is instructive on several levels. At these meetings, occurring one week apart from one another, with the latter only several days before hostilities begin, the Russian policymakers lay out the reasons for employing military force at that particular time, the ultimate goals, and the expected opposition. The scenario begins in the aftermath of Russia's involvement in Ukraine, with the Russian economy performing poorly due to a combination of low oil prices and economic sanctions. War is justified on the grounds that 'We must give the people pride in Russian power ... That is the way to restore morale and to neutralise the opposition'. The view of NATO is somewhat paradoxical. It is described as simultaneously weak but dangerous. Despite NATO's internal problems, the Russian leaders still view it as an existential threat, given what they perceive to be a long-term strategy of encirclement. The Baltic states are characterized as potentially offering NATO 'a convenient launching pad for an attack on us'. The way to prevent this encirclement is to take advantage of NATO's present weakness by seizing eastern Ukraine and the Baltic states. When an objection is raised on economic grounds, that the value of the ruble will fall, thereby worsening Russia's economic situation, this argument is countered on the grounds that Russia will acquire the Donbas manufacturing base, NATO will collapse, international panic will result, leading to a rise in gold and oil prices – thus serving to boost Russia's economy. Later in the story, more expansive goals are stated. The Russian action will really be about altering the balance of power in Europe by exposing NATO's inability to defend the Baltic states leading to its collapse. At that point Russia will be able to militarily blackmail the EU into lifting sanctions, with Russia eventually joining the EU itself. General Sir Richard Shirreff, *2017 War with Russia: An Urgent Warning from Senior Military Command* (London: Coronet, 2016).

³¹ Two recent examples include Graham Allison, *Destined for War? Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Books, 2017) and P. W. Singer and August Cole, *Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).

³² For instance: Jack Hitt, 'The Russian Tom Clancy Is on the Front Lines for Real', *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2016; Cathy Young, 'The Sci-Fi Writers' War: They predicted and possibly inspired the conflict in the Ukraine, and now they're fighting it', *Slate*, 11 July 2014.

familiar with the existence and content of this sort of material. The attention paid to these matters by the Russian military, on the other hand, is quite substantial, and a number of Western scholars have examined it. In particular, they have looked at Russian military exercises and concepts of war.³³

But how useful are an understanding of Russian military exercises and concepts of war to understanding a Russian decision to *initiate* war? A great deal of caution is required before assuming that they would automatically bear significant relation to one another. Certainly, they provide useful indicators of the quality and priorities of the Russian military system and what they might be capable of doing. But whilst it may be tempting to believe the way the Russian military trains is the way they will fight, or what their military thinkers write indicates how they will fight, doing so would be to eliminate the most important factor, political context, from the equation. Neither the military scenarios featured in Russian wargames, nor Russian writings about the future of war, adequately address the political dynamics that would apply in a real-life conflict. This is not simply a problem for the analysis of Russia. The same problem applies to the study of any country's decision-making with respect to war.

A good example of the difficulties of reading too much into Russian military exercises as an indication of actual behaviour can be found in the analysis that followed the Zapad-2017 exercise. In one controversial article, based largely on interviews with two 'Western intelligence sources', the Zapad scenario was described as encompassing 'the capture of the Baltic states (and Belarus) as well as a "shock campaign" against Western European NATO nations such as Germany and the Netherlands, but also against Poland, Norway and the non-aligned states of Sweden and Finland'. In terms of the actual military seizure of the Baltic States, it was noted 'This does not mean that you have to occupy the countries and declare "Peoples' Republics" or something like that, but that you have to occupy the harbours, airports and so on'. Supporting operations were said to include missile strikes against targets in Western Europe such as 'air fields, harbours, energy supplies and so on' for the purpose of shocking NATO countries into withdrawing from the conflict. In addition, Swedish and Finnish airfields would be targeted as well.³⁴

³³ A sampling of recent material includes: Dave Johnson, 'VOSTOK 2018: Ten Years of Russian Strategic Exercises and Warfare Preparation', *NATO Review*, December 20, 2018; Dave Johnson, 'ZAPAD 2017 and Euro-Atlantic Security', *NATO Review*, December 14, 2017; Dave Johnson, 'Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds', Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 3, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research, February 2018; Johann Norberg, 'Military Exercises and Russian Fighting Power 2009-2016' in Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier and Guillaume Lasconjarias (eds.), *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, Forum Paper 26, NATO Defence College Research Division, April 2018; Johann Norberg, 'Training for War: Russia's Strategic-level Military Exercises 2009-2017', FOI-R-4627-SE, FOI, October 2018; Dave Johnson, 'Russia's Approach to Conflict - Implications for NATO's Deterrence and Defence', Research Paper 111, NATO Defence College Research Division, April 2015; John R. Deni (ed.) *Current Russia Military Affairs: Assessing and Countering Russian Strategy, Operational Planning and Modernization*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, July 2018.

³⁴ Julian Röpcke, 'Putin's Zapad 2017 simulated a war against NATO', *BILD*, 19 December 2017.

In response to this article's description of Zapad-2017, Kofman complained that the scenario 'is not only untrue, it simply does not make military sense'.³⁵ One could add that the scenario makes little political sense either. For one thing, the scenario was predicated on a Western intervention in Belarus, with Russia responding to, rather than initiating the conflict. Moreover, it is difficult to contemplate a scenario in which a Russian response to the Western intervention, improbable as that would be in the first instance, would be so disproportionate, consisting as it would of a major expansion of the conflict, with all the risks that entails, not for the least of reasons that it would involve dissipating Russian military strength on numerous fronts rather than keeping the conflict limited. As with other Russian (and Soviet-era) exercise scenarios, one must keep in mind that testing equipment, improving readiness, and intimidating potential adversaries are often the main motives for conducting these exercises,³⁶ and therefore it would be mistaken to believe they are a reflection of war plans, much less a reflection of how the leadership would contemplate the waging of such a conflict.

Naturally, it would be reassuring if one took the scenario at face value, particularly the assumption that for war to start it would not be the Russians who start it. Given that military aggression against Belarus by NATO, or by a coalition of NATO states, is essentially unthinkable, it follows that Russia has little to fear from NATO, and NATO has little to fear from Russia. But if, for the sake of argument, the *defensive* orientation of the exercise was assumed to be a deception, or politically acceptable cover, for an *offensive* orientation, then this would raise a whole new set of analytical problems, both theoretical and practical. For example, to what extent are *defensive* scenarios that involve *counter-attacks* useful in preparing a *military* system to initiate and conduct an *offensive* war? Without doubt, there will be many areas where this will prove useful for some elements of the military as it tests their ability to fight – e.g. by comparing how a military formation or piece of equipment would fare when pitted against a similar formation or piece of equipment of an adversary.

By changing the question, however, to ask how useful defensive scenarios are in preparing a *political system* to initiate a conflict, there would presumably be much less utility as the political challenges are fundamentally different. It is unlikely that the Russian leaders would find the military exercise scenarios of any use were they to be planning to initiate a conflict. Provided they were inclined to conduct some sort of games to assist them in thinking about, or planning for, a

³⁵ Michael Kofman, 'What actually happened during Zapad 2017', 23 December 2017. Available at: <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2017/12/22/what-actually-happened-during-zapad-2017/>

³⁶ For further discussion of this point, see: Keir Giles, 'Russia hit Multiple Targets with Zapad-2017', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2018.

war against NATO, these would be political-military games rather than strictly military games. Therefore, analysis of military exercises such as Zapad should account for the limited utility they offer Russian political leaders as a guide to initiating conflict. As such, they offer little guide when attempting to understand the circumstances of a Russian decision to initiate a conflict against NATO.

A Russian Theory of NATO Collapse?

According to Jakobsen and Ringsmose, 'A failure to respond to Russian aggression against a NATO member state with a military operation aimed at retaking lost territory would spell the end of NATO'.³⁷ The prospect of an 'end of NATO' resulting from Russian aggression in the Baltic states has also been discussed in other analyses.³⁸ Is such a prospect likely? And more to the point, does the Russian leadership view this as a likely prospect? Does it have a 'theory of NATO collapse' laying out what this might look like and how it might be achieved? Moreover, would the existence of such a theory be a pre-condition for Russian military aggression? Before proceeding further, it is important not to confuse efforts to undermine NATO as a *means* to achieve a physical objective in wartime – even in *peacetime* there is ample evidence Russia pursues a range of targeted threats and rewards to undermine Alliance cohesion³⁹ – with efforts to undermine NATO as the *purpose* of a conflict.

The belief that the collapse of NATO might result from a conquest of the Baltic states would be predicated on best-case 'domino theory' assumptions about the impact a relatively minor conflict would have on attacking the foundations of the Alliance. Indeed, it would reflect a 'total victory' resulting from a case of 'limited war'.⁴⁰ If Russian policymakers were to hold this view, it would reflect a broader Russian debate about how to bring about the collapse of NATO, and presumably a rejection of non-military, less costly and less risky ways of achieving this effect. On the other hand, just as subversion failed to lead to NATO's collapse during the Cold War, Russia's more recent subversive efforts to undermine the Alliance have also failed to lead to an 'end of NATO', and therefore a military campaign may be viewed as the only way to achieve this end. Or would it? Confidence in this belief would require some script laying out what a NATO collapse would entail and how Russia's actions would affect NATO in the desired way.

³⁷ Jakobsen and Ringsmose (2018), p. 40

³⁸ For instance, Shlapak has noted: 'the Russian leadership could also convince themselves ... that an opportunity existed to inflict a catastrophic defeat on the threatening NATO alliance by crushing its underprepared defenders in the Baltic states. Taking advantage of this opportunity would demonstrate via a shattering tactical victory NATO's strategic inability to fulfill its primary, foundational mission: guaranteeing the territorial integrity and political independence of its member states. In so doing, Russia would seek to divide the alliance to the point of dissolving it, break the transatlantic security link, and reestablish itself as the dominant power in Eastern and Central Europe'. Shlapak, *The Russian Challenge* (2018), p. 4

³⁹ For a discussion of this point, see: Johnson, 'Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities', p. 45.

⁴⁰ For a useful theoretical discussion of this point, see: Jack S. Levy, 'Big wars, little wars, and theory construction', *International Interactions*, Vol. 16, no. 3, 1990, pp. 215-224

Would it, for instance, involve a formal collapse, with an official abandonment of the North Atlantic Treaty, the dissolving of the Alliance's integrated military command and the US military abandoning its physical presence in Europe? If so, would this happen in a matter of days, weeks, months or years following Russia's actions? Would it involve not so much a formal collapse but an informal collapse, with NATO's institutions remaining officially intact but incapable of meaningful action – meaningful action in this case referring to the conduct of coordinated military operations and the further enlargement of the Alliance? If this latter sort of collapse is intended, would this solve Russia's basic 'existential NATO' problem, in which the mere existence of NATO as a physical institution constitutes a phantom that will continue to haunt them, similar to the exiled Trotsky for Stalin?

Provided that some idea exists of what a NATO collapse would entail, there is the problem of how Russia's actions could make this occur. In a number of recent scenarios it is the lack of an adequate NATO response to a Russian seizure of the Baltic states that leads dissatisfied members to dissolve the Alliance. Again, the dynamics of how this would occur in practice are not discussed. Alternatively, to transplant a Cold War scenario into the present day, Russia could seize some slice of NATO territory, hold it hostage, and then bargain for its release, with the terms being that Russia will withdraw if the leadership of the captured territory agrees to leave the Alliance and adopt neutrality. This would probably be less likely to lead to the collapse of NATO than a Soviet capture of West German territory might have been during the Cold War, but nevertheless it would still inflict a stinging wound.

What other types of military action Russia could conceive that would lead to the destruction of NATO is difficult to speculate about. It may be the case that the Russian leadership is uninterested in the dynamics of collapse, although if they were to assume that X type of action will guarantee that NATO cannot respond, thus leading to its collapse, it still leaves the basic problem of how to define X. For example, if Y amount of territory were captured by Russia and to recapture it would cost NATO Z number of expected casualties, then this would require some confidence that Z would be sufficiently high as to dissuade an attempt to recapture the territory. Among the reasons this is a difficult problem to speculate about is the relationship between expected casualties and the amount of territory to be recaptured. From Russia's perspective is it preferable to undertake a larger military attack that would involve capturing and defending a larger area of territory, or to launch a smaller military attack that would involve capturing and defending a smaller area of territory? Would, for instance, NATO's casualty tolerance increase if there was more territory to recapture? Paradoxically, would NATO be less inclined to attempt to recapture a small amount of territory if it still involved a significant number of casualties? One further problem the Russian leadership will have in attempting to define X is guaranteeing that NATO collapses in a way that serves Russian foreign policy objectives, which would necessitate thinking about conducting the aggression in such a way as to minimize harm to Russia's 'post-NATO'

relationships with Alliance members, as well as not undermining Russia's role in the international community.

As can be discerned even from this very superficial discussion of a 'Russian theory of NATO collapse', there are any number of imponderables that should serve to act as a brake on Russian policymakers having sufficient confidence to undertake aggression against NATO on the assumption that this would lead to an Alliance collapse. For NATO policymakers, taking steps to reduce this confidence is partly a matter of communicating the scope of its military and non-military options, but more importantly, it is about communicating its resilience in this sort of scenario.

If the destruction of NATO can be ruled out as implausible, would Russia have some 'lesser' motive for initiating military action, with the stakes sufficiently high as to justify the risks? In some scenarios, Russia takes military action in the Baltics ostensibly on behalf of ethnic Russian minorities living in the region.⁴¹ But in such scenarios, this action on behalf of ethnic Russians is usually viewed as providing an excuse, with Moscow's real purpose being something else. In fact, Russia is often portrayed as creating the 'ethnic minority' crisis precisely for the purpose of providing a legitimate excuse to intervene. Similarly, references to 'opportunism' are often heard; in other words, Russian leaders are said to be acting on the premise that an 'opportunity' exists for them to seize.

Here we return to the basic problem of what that real purpose or opportunity might be. Although any number of 'military opportunities' might exist, defined here as instances where Russia could score some sort of military victory (e.g. a defeat of some fraction of NATO forces, the capture of some fraction of NATO territory) the 'opportunity' must still be of sufficient importance as to merit the risks involved. And although there are any number of related issues, such as what sort of opportunity Russia would create, how quickly Russia would be able to seize an opportunity that it did not create, the basic problem remains of what constitutes a 'sufficient opportunity'. Is it only one in which there is a high probability NATO will not respond militarily? Or not respond *in any way*, be it militarily, diplomatically, and so on? In lieu of acceptable options for military aggression, it would seem that Russia will be forced to remain content with a 'Theory of Irritating NATO'.

Scripting Success

To place this contemporary problem in context, it is worth considering Cold War scenarios of what might constitute a Soviet success against NATO. Doing so highlights the abundance of varying interpretations of the options available to the Soviets. In the early 1980s, for instance, to make his case

⁴¹ Duncan Long, Terence K. Kelly, and David C. Gompert, *Smarter Power, Stronger Partners, Vol. II: Trends in Force Projection against Potential Adversaries*, RAND, 2017.

for NATO strategy to adopt an element of 'conventional retaliation', Samuel Huntington laid out a scenario of successful Soviet aggression. The scenario began from the premise that the Soviets 'may not reach the Pyrenees, or the English Channel, or even the Rhine. They may or may not occupy Frankfurt, Hamburg, or Munich. Inevitably they will, however, score some gains.' Following the capture of at least some West German territory, the prospect of a costly NATO counter-attack would give way to negotiations. Huntington then goes on to describe the resulting Soviet success:

It takes little imagination to think of the types of appeals the Soviets would make to West German authorities and political groups to accept some degree of demilitarization or neutralization in order to secure Soviet withdrawal and to avoid the replay of World War II in their country. A Soviet invasion of West Germany that ended with the neutralization and/or demilitarization of all or part of that country would be a tremendous success from the Soviet point of view. It would decisively alter the balance of power in Europe and in the world. Its costs, in terms of losses of men and equipment, would have to be very substantial to outweigh these political, military, and diplomatic gains.⁴²

Contrast this idea of success with that of Vigor:

Why are the Russians supposed to be attacking us? I mean, I assume that the war we are talking about is one that the Russians have started, not one that NATO has started on its part? Why have they done this? Soviet military doctrine insists that war is a tool of policy. You don't just start a war because it is Tuesday and it is Presidential Election Day and you can't think of anything else to do. You start a war in order to gain important political objectives; and they have got to be important ones because war is an expensive and a very risky business. If such masters of the art of war as the Germans can get beaten in two world wars, the incompetent Russians can obviously be beaten in a third one, and the Russians know it. So it has got to be for important military objectives. ... This nonsense of tiny nibbles in western Germany. You don't start major wars for tiny nibbles.⁴³

John Mearsheimer took a similar view, stating that 'Such a limited victory is hardly an attractive option'.⁴⁴ But under what circumstances *would* the Soviets attack? Here Vigor discussed two possible wars:

⁴² Samuel P. Huntington, 'Conventional Deterrence and Conventional Retaliation in Europe', *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter, 1983-1984), pp. 32-56, specifically pp. 38-40.

⁴³ 'The Northern Flank in a Central European War', FOA Symposium, The Swedish National Defence Research Institute, Stockholm, November 4-5, 1980, pp. 83-84.

⁴⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Soviets Can't Win Quickly in Central Europe', *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Summer 1982, p. 5

In one I am supposing that the Federal Republic has decided to go in for nuclear weapons. The Russians will obviously not stand for that, so they have got to take the Federal Republic over, in order to destroy its nuclear capability and liquidate its nuclear scientists. That produces a strategy which will stop the armies at the Rhine. The other one ... a stop at the Channel. But that is not very plausible, because you cannot stop at the Channel ... any Soviet strategy aimed at a major takeover of Europe has got to destroy or occupy the British Isles ... a stepping stone into Europe for the United States ... Because the real enemy, the only enemy that counts for the Soviet Union is the United States.⁴⁵

A related (but still distinct) view was provided by Vigor's colleague, Chris Donnelly:

The Soviet aim in a full scale war against NATO must be to surround, destroy or otherwise neutralise NATO forces, and thereby bring about a collapse of the NATO political structure within a matter of days – during 'the initial period'. An invasion can stop at nothing less than the occupation of West Germany, the Low Countries and the Baltic Littoral. It seems unlikely that the USSR would at this time willingly embark on an invasion of France or the UK.⁴⁶

By contrast, yet another scenario envisaged a situation:

... in which the Warsaw Pact initiates a war with the goal of seizing the European peninsula. Included as a part of the Pact's mission would be seizure of the French channel ports. The attack would include air and/or rocket attacks against the United Kingdom.⁴⁷

From even this limited sample of varying ideas about potential Soviet aggression, one common denominator is the assumption of a linkage between political objectives and the geographic extent of military action. In today's context, if the purpose of Russian military action is to achieve some positive new status quo, one would hopefully assume that Russian decision-makers had some idea of what this amounts to in practical terms, though it may also be the case they are simply overconfident and uninterested in the technical details. How often in history have leaders gone to war with detailed proposals already in hand about how they would secure the peace? Do they not merely go to war with some basic ideas in their heads, leaving the details to be dealt with at a later date?

⁴⁵ 'The Northern Flank in a Central European War', pp. 84-85

⁴⁶ Chris Donnelly, 'The Soviet Threat to Europe in the 1980s'. Copy available at the Russia Military Studies Archive, UK Defence Academy, Shrivenham.

⁴⁷ Col. Graham D. Vernon, 'Soviet Options for War in Europe: Nuclear or Conventional?' *Strategic Review*, Winter 1979, p. 57

Returning for a moment to the possibility that Russia's actions would be guided by best-case assumptions, there remains a significant gap between the action and the reaction. Let us suppose, for sake of argument, that Russia physically captures all three Baltic states. The Alliance would be reduced from 29 to 26 members – or would it? Would the governments of the three Baltic states surrender or continue fighting in exile, similar to the Allied governments-in-exile during the Second World War? Would NATO members recognize a Russian-imposed *de facto* government instead? What if Russia insisted that the local governments under its control adopt neutrality and formally withdraw from the Alliance in exchange for a withdrawal of the occupation forces? Or would Russia prefer these governments to retain their position in the Alliance, acting as a Russian Trojan Horse? Yet if it tried to do so, could it guarantee the loyalty of these governments? Would not the same problem of the existential NATO phantom remain?

Among the most important questions posed by the prospect of Russian aggression is what sort of self-imposed limits Russian policymakers would place on their own actions, especially with respect to geography, and whether these limits would be predicated on ideas about the different political reactions that would be generated by the capture of different types of territory. One can make a military argument, that the physical objectives are determined by the amount of territory that the military leadership believe, perhaps supported by some military-scientific calculations, can be captured and secured against a counter-attack with the force at hand. Depending on the forces allocated to the Russian military for this purpose, it may be the case that the Baltic states are all that can reasonably be expected to be captured and secured. Suppose, however, that the forces allocated would allow the Russian military to advance beyond the Baltic states, perhaps to the gates of Warsaw or Berlin. Would not Russian leaders calculate that going beyond a certain point would generate an adverse political reaction to the one intended? If the political goal is to lead to the collapse or fragmentation of NATO, this requires a certain type of political reaction among its members, namely a benign acceptance of Russia's military actions, thus not leading to significant efforts to reverse the new status quo, such as insisting on the liberation of the conquered territory, demanding restitution, and so on.

In the course of planning a political-military offensive Russian policymakers will assume that the Alliance is divided among those who are able or unable, willing or unwilling, to take action to counter their aggression. It will therefore seek to discourage those who are able to take action, and not alienate those who are able but unwilling to take action. For example, Russia might refrain from attacking Polish, German or even American territory on the basis that to do so would unduly strengthen resistance instead of undermining it. At some point, Russia will have to assume that it has gone too far.

Here a basic problem emerges. If Russia assumes that the US leads the NATO alliance and that the US opposes Russia's actions, then the challenge for Russia becomes one of ensuring that the rest of NATO does not so much take a benign attitude towards Russia's actions, but instead takes an overtly negative approach to US or US-led counter-actions. In effect, this would mean that NATO would not simply be a 'rubber stamp' organization that approved of the US actions in principle, which, at a minimum, included offering the US political support, even if military support was lacking. Rather, it would reject the option of acting as an Alliance, in all its forms, political as well as military, to defend its members. In practical terms this might amount to pressuring NATO members not to invoke Article 5. This would create an unusual dilemma for the divided Alliance membership. If the Alliance as a whole is unwilling to act in support of the *coalition* of Alliance members that are bearing the brunt of the military burden, even to the minimal extent of invoking Article 5, would the members of the anti-Russia coalition themselves choose to dispense with NATO, thereby becoming the architects of its demise? In its place, would a new, more hostile Alliance or informal coalition of anti-Russia nations emerge? Would such a new anti-Russia configuration be more or less to Russia's liking than if it left NATO alone in the first place?

The ideal scenario for Russia to achieve its desired ends would be for the United States to refrain from taking action. In the absence of US leadership and military capabilities, any Russian gains could be more easily secured. Two outcomes might result regardless of whether NATO remains in-being. One outcome would be for a new status quo to emerge, in which the European members of NATO accept Russia's actions and align more closely with Moscow, with the US military role in Europe coming to an end. An alternative outcome would be for a number of the European members to form their own anti-Russia bloc.

A key actor that has not been mentioned up to this point is the European Union. As an attack on NATO would probably involve an attack on an EU member, how then would the EU react? Would it automatically invoke its own mutual defence clause – Article 42 (7) – leading to an EU political and military response, independently or alongside NATO? To attempt to shed light on this question would open up a can of worms. Consequently, it is merely sufficient for our purposes here to point out that it *would* constitute an additional can of worms further complicating Russian policymaking and putting additional pressure on Russian decision-makers.

ESSENTIAL ASPECTS OF A DECISION

As can be discerned from the preceding discussion, one of the fundamental problems with the aforementioned scenarios is that they downplay political context – yet states do not have a habit of initiating military aggression without having some objective in mind, some idea of costs and benefits, some idea of what they are willing to risk in order to gain whatever it is they want to gain. The analytical

challenge in attempting to sort through the numerous issues, identify the relevant variables and assign probabilities is enormous.

To illustrate this point, consider the following question: Under which of the following circumstances would Russian military aggression against NATO be most likely:

1. If the leadership of one or more NATO member states are pro-Russian, perhaps outspokenly so, then is the ideal time for Russia to take military action while those individuals remain in charge, on the grounds that they will hinder a NATO response?⁴⁸
2. Alternatively, if a consensus view exists within NATO that is hostile to Russia then is this the time when military action is best avoided? Or, by contrast, is this the time to launch a preventive war?

Put another way, is the best time to attack when the Alliance is united or divided? A united NATO may appear more threatening but a divided NATO may just be a precursor to a united NATO at a later date. The ultimate question, however, is this: are these relevant variables, and if so, how relevant are they? Is it the character of the American president – whoever it is – that motivates the Russian decision? Does it matter whether one or more NATO leaders hold pro-Russian views? What actually matters?

The Decision-making Process

What is it we are actually talking about when we refer to a decision to initiate military aggression? We need to focus on two components of this: the decision itself, specifically the process – and what sort of things would shape that decision. We also need some guidance and for that we need to look at some comparable examples from history.⁴⁹ Although not conclusive, history can at least give us some idea of what we should be looking for. We also need more theories to explain how decisions for war in Russia are made. As one analyst noted about trying to answer the question ‘How and why does the Soviet Union decide to march or not to march into Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan or Poland’, it was necessary to develop ‘abstracted and generalized models of decision-making and behaviour’.⁵⁰ When looking at any historical case of war initiation or other types of military intervention, be it Soviet/Russian or non-Russian, large-scale or small-scale, involving an authoritarian or democratic state, etc. one should ask

⁴⁸ A similar question was posed to former DSACEUR General Shirreff in an interview: Uri Friedman, ‘What If Russia Invaded the Baltics—and Donald Trump Was President?’ *The Atlantic*, July 27, 2016.

⁴⁹ In preparing this paper, I consulted the following works on Soviet/Russian decision-making associated with military interventions from 1939 to the present: Kimmo Rentola, ‘Intelligence and Stalin's Two Crucial Decisions in the Winter War, 1939–40’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 35, No. 5, 2013, pp. 1089-1112; Kieran Williams, ‘New Sources on Soviet Decision Making during the 1968 Czechoslovak Crisis’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (May 1996), pp. 457-470; Mark Kramer, ‘New Evidence on Soviet Decision-Making and the 1956 Polish and Hungarian Crises’, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8–9 (Winter 1996–Spring 1997); Mark Kramer, ‘The Kremlin, The Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine’, CIA, 2009; ‘Documents on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan’, e-Dossier No. 4, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Washington DC, November 2001; Tor Bukkvoll, ‘Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests and Decision-making in the Russian Use of Force in Crimea and Donbas’, *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2016, pp. 267-282.

⁵⁰ Arthur J. Alexander, ‘Modeling Soviet Defense Decisionmaking’ in Jiri Valenta and William C. Potter, *Soviet Decisionmaking for National Security* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), p. 11.

several questions: What were the goals of the military action? When was the decision made to prepare for military action and when was the decision made to initiate military action? What sort of issues did the policymakers of these countries consider when weighing their options? Were they only concerned about the local consequences? Were they concerned about the regional and international implications? Was the decision taken on the basis of military advice or in spite of it? Who actually made the decision? Was it one individual? Or a collective decision – either in a formal body, such as a National Security Council, or an informal body of a handful of advisers?

When it comes to the decision itself, one sees it broken down into two main components. First there is a decision for preparation, although this can consist of a series of inter-related decisions, what I refer to as *general preparation* and *specific preparation*. For instance, general preparation might include the development of detailed war plans, increasing overall readiness, and so on. This is to be distinguished from a purely peacetime military posture. Specific preparation includes altering the disposition of forces, for instance, by putting more troops along the border of the country you plan to attack, distributing ammunition, and increasing tactical reconnaissance – in other words, having everything prepared while awaiting the final order to attack.⁵¹ And then there is the decision for action, often in the form of a directive stating on date X and at Y hour the military offensive will begin. When looking at the historical cases, decision times vary considerably, usually depending on the size and scale of the upcoming conflict. In many cases, general preparations take months or years, specific preparations days, weeks or months, although often the final decision is taken hours or days beforehand – usually because of the need to maintain secrecy on the one hand, but also in case one changes one's mind at the last moment.

Who makes these decisions? Does the head of state or head of government set general policy? Does he or she arbitrate amongst the senior policymakers? Who is informing these decisions?⁵² And how long

⁵¹ These categories are my own, but I am drawing heavily on a CIA analysis describing Soviet phases, in which the following four are listed and described: 1. Constant combat readiness – normal peacetime readiness status; 2. Increased combat readiness – units are brought up to strength, plans are reviewed, increased manning at command posts; 3. Threat of war combat readiness – units deploy from garrison to dispersal areas; 4. Full combat readiness – full mobilization, wartime readiness, units alerted, dispersed, mobilized. See: CIA, 'Warning of War in Europe', June 27, 1984. Available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001486834.pdf

⁵² As Alexander (1984) discusses in relation to the Soviet leadership: 'I divide the actors in the Soviet defense decisionmaking process into two levels: high and low. The high-level actors comprise the Politburo, Central Committee Secretariat, and Presidium of the Council of Ministers. The lower-level actors include the production ministries, Defense Ministry, and Party organizations below the Central Committee. A few organizations bridge the gap between these levels and coordinate lower level activities: the Military Industrial Commission being one of these. At the top, the Defense Council may consolidate the high-level views. These two classes of actors play different roles and respond to diverse classes of forces and influences. The high levels have authority to make decisions. They hold power. They can decide, intervene, review, accept, decline. They often face problems of conflicting goals that require political action to resolve. The lower levels act, implement, generate information (from their activities and from analyses); they face problems that require high-level solution; they put forward proposals, initiatives, alternatives; they generate conflict among themselves that often must be resolved by political decisions. The high levels produce policies, but in most cases do not have the tools or capabilities to carry them out. Theirs is the role to decide but to decide what, and why? The subjects, the information, the arguments usually come up from below.' p. 12

does it take to make a decision? Needless to say, all of these questions are relevant if one is trying to become aware of a decision pending or a decision already taken, or to influence that decision. Western analysts of Soviet decision-making often held many competing views of these questions. For some, Soviet leaders were viewed as a unified collective of strategic actors who coldly calculated their actions in pursuit of a master plan. Others viewed the leadership as consisting of like-minded individuals that, despite disagreeing over tactics, still possessed similar views about long range foreign policy goals and the utility of military force. There was also the belief that Soviet leaders lacked a master plan but were merely opportunists; while consistently reinforcing favourable trends they waited for opportunities to present themselves and were ready to take advantage of them when they did. In some analyses, the bureaucratic politics model was used to demonstrate how competition among Soviet institutional interests impacted Soviet policymaking. There was also the idea that on foreign policy issues of critical importance Soviet leaders were risk averse and therefore they preferred solutions that worked in the past rather than experimenting with new ones.⁵³

In all the historical cases I looked at, there was a great deal of consultation among the senior policymakers, options were debated, plans discussed, and policy refined to come into line with practical limitations. As we are talking about big wars, or little wars or interventions that have the prospect of escalating into a big war, or at least escalating to the point where the political consequences are substantial, one would assume that decisions to undertake military action are not simple to make, or that they are made 'off the cuff'. There are lots of moving parts, lots of objections, modifications, clarifications, etc. that are a part of this process. Moreover, things change. External as well as internal developments can have an impact in speeding up or slowing down the decision-making process, even leading to the abandonment of the march towards war.

To the extent decisions about Russian military aggression involve a wider cast than simply the Russian president, it is useful to remember that although the president may provide the inspiration for pursuing this policy course, and will almost certainly be responsible for issuing the orders, dealing with the majority of associated issues, including the formulation of policy options, will be the responsibility of other elements of the Russian Government. Whether a 'whole-of-government' approach would be taken depends on the president's preference for how widely within the Russian Government the secret of impending military action should become known, which in turn will be a matter of what sort of preparations are necessary beyond those of the military forces that would be directly involved in the

⁵³ See the following chapters in Valenta and Potter (1984). Alexander, 'Modeling Soviet Defense Decisionmaking', pp. 9-22; Dennis Ross, 'Risk Aversion in Soviet Decisionmaking', pp. 237-254; Jiri Valenta, 'Soviet Decisionmaking on Czechoslovakia, 1968', pp. 165-184; Galia Golan, 'Soviet Decisionmaking in the Yom Kippur War, 1973', pp. 185-217; Jiri Valenta 'Soviet Decisionmaking on Afghanistan, 1979', pp. 218-236; Stephen M. Meyer, 'Soviet National Security Decisionmaking: What Do We Know and What Do We Understand?', pp. 255-297. Also: Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011), pp. 58-81.

seizure of enemy territory. This decision of who to involve creates a trade-off between maximizing secrecy on the one hand and maximizing policy and bureaucratic efficiency on the other. At some point, maximizing secrecy at the expense of efficiency can be counterproductive to the extent that it creates all sorts of additional problems.

Beyond the military forces directly involved in any operation, an unwillingness to engage the foreign policy and propaganda bureaucracies would likely lead to catastrophic consequences, as these bureaucracies would be essential for translating military success into political-strategic success. However, the more actors one involves in the policy process, the more that technical issues and competing priorities impact on policy, the greater the chasm that emerges between the original policy vision and the actual policy output. Among the most vexed questions a Russian president would face is the degree to which the Russian public should be mobilized, and how far in advance of the military aggression this process should begin. Upon launching military operations, though more probably beforehand, some narrative will need to be communicated to the public to justify the action and rally support. For any Russian leader, having the option of ordering a national mobilization, even if not directly supporting the military aggression, is still useful in the event the military campaign does not go according to plan, the conflict looks as though it is going to drag out, or if Russian territory itself is attacked.⁵⁴

Critical Decision Inputs

From the preceding discussion we can identify a decision-making process and an output – a decision, or series of decisions. But what about the inputs? What goes into that decision or those decisions? Let us return again to the present day and consider in relation to a decision to initiate military aggression against NATO. What is the objective? In other words, why do this? There are a few plausible reasons that immediately come to mind based on historic precedent. The first is to seize territory. This can be for permanent seizure and exploitation, perhaps because there is something about the territory itself that makes it valuable – economically, militarily, culturally, etc. Alternatively, seizure of territory is merely a means to an end – one holds it hostage temporarily in order to gain a political concession. Another reason to attack an adversary might be to disrupt the enemy, to set them back in some way, to humiliate them – for strategic reasons, domestic political reasons, and so forth. There are other types of military action that do not involve the physical capture of territory that can be considered as well and which can all result in significant deaths, including attacks at sea, attacks by aircraft or missiles, and cyber-attacks. For instance, in many scenarios of a US-China clash, the military action is mainly confined

⁵⁴ An excellent discussion of the complexities of Russian decision-making, as well as the Russian Government's increasing emphasis on national mobilization, especially in relation to its concerns about what the 2020s hold in store for Russia, can be found in: Andrew Monaghan, *Power in Modern Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

to the sea, air, and the cyber domain, with no significant discussion of a clash of land forces or 'kinetic' attacks on civilian populations.

Although I will keep the remainder of my remarks limited to the land domain, it is important to remember that wars can take various forms – and the choice of how to wage war is connected to a set of other choices about objectives, available resources, assessment of success, etc. But assuming we are discussing the seizure of territory, any aggressor has to address the following questions: what to attack and to avoid attacking, as well as what to hold and for how long? In relation to the Baltics and NATO, if we are to stick to this scenario, it would seem the Russian Government has quite a few options: attack one Baltic state, two, three, three plus Poland and/or some other NATO territory, a portion of one or more of the Baltic states – for instance, seizing a slice of territory but leaving the rest of the government intact, or some similar formula.

On what basis does the Russian Government assess which of these options is best? And does NATO think about the implications of these options, especially when it comes to indications and warning and its defence posture. Thus, should NATO be worried about 27 manoeuvre battalions attempting to take over all of Estonia and Latvia, or only a single battalion attempting to capture a small slice of territory? And assuming the intent is to occupy the territory, would not further decisions need to be made about occupation policy, as well as having occupation forces and an occupation regime made ready to follow the combat forces? After all, the USSR/Russia has had quite a lot of experience, some good, some not so good, in putting governments into power, be it the 'Finnish Democratic Republic' in 1939 or the 'Donetsk People's Republic' in 2014.

During the Cold War, a great deal of attention was placed on these problems. For instance, especially during the early Cold War there was the idea that the Soviet Union, and its allies, would not only attempt to seize Europe, but also the Middle East and Asia.⁵⁵ Later this was reduced to Europe only, and then to one portion of Europe – with most attention placed on the Central Front, albeit there was also some concern about the NATO flanks, such as a seizure of northern Norway.⁵⁶ On the central front, one could also distinguish between aggression that led to the conquest of all of Western Europe, an attack stopping at the French frontier, at the Channel, at the Rhine, etc. However, the idea that the Soviet Union might, for example, attempt to seize a slice of Norway, but not conduct any other military aggression,

⁵⁵ To take two examples, see: 'Joint Strategic Objectives Plan for an Assumed D-Day of 1 July 1956', Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Strategic Plans Group, 8 January 1953. This document notes: 'In case of global war, the USSR will endeavour to overrun the strategically important land areas of Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East; to sever the sea lines of communication thereto; and to destroy, by aerial and subversive action, the military and industrial capability of the western Powers beyond the reach of Soviet land forces'. Also: CIA, 'Special Estimate: The Strength and Capabilities of Soviet Bloc Forces to Conduct Military Operations against NATO', SE-16, 12 October 1951. Available at: https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000269261.pdf

⁵⁶ See for instance, 'Contingency Plans Excluding General War', MCM-0165-1965, 18 November 1965. Available via the NATO archives online.

always seemed farfetched. The same was also true of other scenarios, most famously the so-called 'Hamburg Grab'. Seizure of West Berlin was a much more serious possibility, but even here the lack of Soviet action was quite telling. For NATO, the nature of the Soviet objective had a direct bearing on the size of the Soviet/Warsaw Pact force it was likely to be confronting, and how much time the adversary needed to launch their offensive. In some scenarios, only units of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (approximately 20 divisions) would be involved, these might or might not be supported by additional Soviet forces based in Eastern Europe and the Western USSR, and these might be supported, or not, by the non-Soviet forces of the Warsaw Pact.

With each of these options, Soviet and Russian leaders would presumably have sufficient confidence in their ability to undertake successfully some form of military aggression and to achieve their objective while minimizing the risk of a major escalation and/or defeat. We are assuming, after all, reasoned and deliberate action, rather than action of the unthinking and random sort. We are also assuming sustained military aggression rather than a one-off incident (e.g. a discrete action such as a brief and isolated mortar barrage, the sinking of a naval vessel or the downing of a single plane) or a series of one-off incidents over an extended period of time (similar to the Egyptian-Israeli 'war of attrition', skirmishes along the India-Pakistan border, etc.). One may assign different values but military action must hold the prospect of providing some beneficial result. When it comes to the problem of consequences when deciding on alternative courses of military action, it is crucial not to limit the discussion to military consequences alone – for instance, if we attack W we can expect X number of casualties, but if we attack Y we can expect Z number of casualties. One cannot rule out the possibility that military consequences will be the only type of repercussions considered by senior policymakers, but it is extremely unlikely this would be the case.

A few other consequences of undertaking military action are particularly noteworthy and would almost certainly shape the campaign design. First, a widening of the conflict zone by the adversary instead of military action confined to a discrete area. Thus, instead of military action confined to the Baltics, the zone of action could be extended by NATO directly to Kaliningrad, Russian Federation territory more generally, or to Russian assets elsewhere. If, for instance, Russian bombs were dropped on cities in NATO territory, would not Russian cities also be considered legitimate targets. Second, the duration of military action can be extended. Instead of military action aimed at concluding in the course of days or weeks, NATO's timeline could be indefinitely extended. Third, the impact on the Alliance may be to strengthen their cohesion and resolve rather than undermine it. Fourth, the diplomatic and economic impact of aggression may be to isolate Russia as an international player, resulting in heavy sanctions. All of these problems place a premium on the success of intra-war diplomacy and making sure that efforts to reduce these risks are a guiding principle in the design of the military campaign.

It is generally believed that achieving some level of surprise will be a fundamental feature of any Russian decision to undertake aggression. But what if surprise cannot be achieved? How would this affect the Russia decision? For instance, should the element of surprise be compromised at the last moment, Russian leaders would need to decide whether to call off the attack, or to speed up the attack – thus moving ahead before all the elements are in place. The surprise dilemma also has implications for the desirability of rehearsal. Rehearsal can take at least three forms.

The first can take place in the course of military exercises, wargames and other hypothetical exercises. The second can occur in the form of military action taken against a third party, in order to gain experience, test tactics and equipment in battle conditions, and so forth. For instance, the Spanish civil war has often been discussed in terms of a ‘dress rehearsal’ for the Second World War. The third would involve some minor action taken against the party for whom the main performance is intended, and is conducted primarily to test reactions, such as how and how quickly the adversary responds. Conducting rehearsals can give the leadership confidence in their ability to carry out the mission they have in mind, and to make adjustments to force structures and plans based on the results. Because of these benefits, some form of rehearsal might be considered a prerequisite before any final decision would be made to initiate military aggression. On the other hand, rehearsals can also cause additional problems, as they often reveal one’s hand, leading to a more alert adversary.

Decisions for war also often hinge on the assumptions about the enemy one will be fighting – e.g. the size of the enemy force, how well they are equipped – and in the case of enemy coalitions and alliances, attempting to split them, to divide and rule, is considered an elementary principle of strategy. When applied to the present discussion, it is useful to ask who the Russians will be fighting, and more to the point, who do they wish to be fighting? At least four possibilities or some combination of these come to mind: (1) the nation/nations directly involved (military + paramilitary forces), (2) NATO troops based there (assuming there are any), (3) a Coalition ‘rescue force’ or (4) a NATO ‘rescue force’. For Russia, the obvious preference would be for (1). The worst-case option would be (4). The selection of (4) rather than (3) as the worst-case option is based on the supremacy of political-strategic issues over strictly military ones, for although option (3) might provide for a superior military capability than (4), the very nature of (3) implies a divided Alliance, and possibly a dead Alliance, whereas (4) implies a politically united Alliance.

It is possible that for Russia to reduce the risk of (4) will depend on how it deals with (2), all the more so if one gives any credence to the ‘trip-wire’ deterrence philosophy (or justification) given by NATO to its multinational ‘enhanced forward presence’, which is that to attack these forces means killing soldiers

of several NATO nations which then will draw in the Alliance as a whole. But if these soldiers are not killed, but instead are isolated, bypassed, or simply captured and held hostage, this may have an impact on reducing the likelihood of (4). Reducing the risk of both (3) and (4) may also be related to how Russia deals with (1).

There are at least two considerations in this regard. The first consideration links Russia's military conduct with respect to (1) to the international reaction it will generate. If Russia's conduct is too harsh, this is likely to strengthen international opposition to it, whereas if it is relatively benign there is likely to be less international opposition. This relates directly to the second consideration which is the extent to which (1) continues to fight as opposed to throwing in the towel. If the Russian leadership were confident that the resistance of (1) can be broken early on in the conflict, and (2) can be dealt with peaceably, then this might reduce the prospect of (3) or (4) and hence increase Moscow's willingness to decide in favour of war. It may also be appreciated that reducing resistance from (1) is likely to be dependent on (1's) assumptions about the resistance to be expected from (3) and (4).

Decisions for war, whether consciously or unconsciously, will be shaped by the ideas of war termination and a transition to some new, preferably positive, or at least less bad, peacetime status quo. Similarly, not only the decision for war, but decisions about the public justification for launching military aggression, will be shaped by the desire to ensure public support, retain allies, disrupt enemy cohesion, and avoid creating new enemies. In this sense, Russian leaders will be faced with the dilemma of prior consultation with their allies. At one level, the support of allies is necessary, otherwise international isolation is more likely, but at another level, there are secrecy risks as well as attempts by allies to dissuade such action from occurring in the first place. At a minimum, the Russian narrative justifying the war would need to be crafted to ensure the passive support of its allies.

In a number of the historical cases where the Soviet Union undertook military interventions, as in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the deliberations of Soviet policymakers highlight intense interest about the reputational costs of taking action versus not taking action to restore Moscow's authority.⁵⁷ The military contest itself, to the extent there was one, was always viewed as a foregone conclusion. The broader decision about military intervention, and the hesitancy about undertaking it, had to do with the expectation that the Soviet position in the Communist Bloc and on the global stage would be undermined. When military intervention was necessary, it was preferable, where possible, that Soviet allies took the lead rather than the Soviets themselves, as was the case in Poland in 1980-81, but

⁵⁷ As Ross (1984) notes, although Soviet leaders were risk averse, this did not rule out their taking action in crises such as Hungary. Rather, actions were only taken when the costs of inaction were deemed to be greater. He concludes that 'decisive Soviet action may result more from the need to pre-empt or avert failure than the desire to create big successes'. p. 237

regardless, decisions to take military action only occurred after non-military means failed to defuse the political crisis. Crucially, these interventions almost always occurred where the Soviets were confident there was little risk of sparking a superpower crisis since they felt the US was likely to regard them as 'merely confirming or only marginally modifying the status quo, rather than violating vital interests'.⁵⁸ The more recent cases of Russian military action against Georgia and Ukraine, especially the inputs to the decision-making, are difficult to ascertain given the lack of primary sources (minutes of key meetings, etc.). Nevertheless, one can hypothesize based on the known facts – what happened relative to what *could have* happened. Most notably, in both cases the Russian military was stronger than the opposition and could have seized more territory, if not overthrown the governments of both countries. Given that this did not occur, it begs two questions. Why did it not do so? And as it did not do so in these two cases, would Russia do so with a NATO state? The answer to the second question can be partially addressed in the answer to the first. There are several likely reasons why Russia did not aim to capture Tbilisi or Kiev. For one thing, occupying more territory was costly – in terms of direct expenses and soldiers' lives. To remove the government would have created further complications, both in the international community as well as in the conquered territory. Doing so was probably unnecessary to achieve the political goal, assuming that the goal was to humiliate and disrupt the adversary, thus winning a short and easy victory. So long as the Russian interventions did not spark a major escalation the chances for a political and military success were high.

Unlike the Georgia War, the Ukraine intervention did have one notable effect which is directly relevant to the discussion of the Baltics. Despite Ukraine not being a NATO member covered under Article 5, NATO chose to respond to Russia's actions in 2014 by increasing their defensive measures and focusing more attention on Russia. And this occurred despite the reluctance of many NATO members who were eager not to jeopardize their bilateral relations with Russia or because they did not want the prioritization of the 'eastern flank' to deflect attention from other security challenges. This reaction is significant because it suggests that rather than NATO accepting a *fait accompli* defeat, there is a strong possibility that Russian aggression would actually serve to unify the Alliance in opposition to Moscow. One would have to assume cognitive dissonance on the part of the Russian leadership if they were to think otherwise.

The Choice of Enemies

For all the risks involved in an attack on NATO, what are the desired effects? Effects, can of course, include a wide range of personal, political, strategic and other changes to the status quo. Any Russian leader contemplating an attack on NATO probably has at least one of several goals in mind for the

⁵⁸ Hannes Adomeit, 'Soviet Crisis Prevention and Management: Why and When Do the Soviet Leaders Take Risks?' RAND/UCLA Center for the Study of Soviet International Behavior, Occasional Paper OPS-008, October 1986, p. 14

military operation, constituting the direct effect, even if the indirect effects of taking this action are more widespread.

An attack may be intended to weaken NATO, whilst keeping the basic system of Euro-/Trans-Atlantic security more or less in place. Alternatively, it can be part of a broader effort to reset international geopolitics, or at least the European security system, in a more favourable alignment for Russia. A key requirement of the latter, involving as it does a shake-up of world politics, is a 'revolutionary' theory of international relations and an associated program of how to achieve it. Such ideas have guided previous wars of territorial conquest, regardless of the opposition they were likely to face, as was the case with Nazi Germany's 'New Order' and Japan's 'Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere'. On the other hand, in the case of international communism, overt aggression was ultimately rejected in favor of a combination of peaceful coexistence, active subversion and lingering military threat. In today's Russia, ideas associated with the Eurasianist movement,⁵⁹ to take one prominent example, might provide the vision for such a pro-Russian new world order, were they ever to replace, or seriously compete with, Russia's existing foreign policy preference of co-existing with NATO,⁶⁰ albeit, as during the Cold War, simultaneously using non-military means to undermine it. Alternatively, a more militarized version of the 'Greater Europe'⁶¹ vision that has held a prominent place in Russian foreign policy for many years, or initiatives to promote a new European security treaty,⁶² might also offer some indication of the ideal end state.

Assuming, for sake of argument, such a revolutionary philosophy inspired a Russia policy to attack NATO, it would be surprising if this philosophy did not include some reference to consolidation in the 'near abroad' before expanding into the 'far abroad'. Put another way, would not Russia seek to annex, or at least force into a closer alliance, countries like Azerbaijan or Belarus or Georgia, all of which are easier targets for coercion – diplomatically, militarily, etc. – before attempting the much more difficult task of confronting a powerful (at least in terms of capabilities) military alliance? Or what about non-NATO members such as Finland and Sweden? Even if there was no intent to invade either of these two countries in a large-scale sense, might not some small-scale seizure of 'strategic geography', such as Gotland,⁶³ be more likely than a seizure of NATO territory, perhaps acting on the basis of a strategic rationale, similar to that of some Soviet strategists prior to the 1939-1940 Winter War, who believed that acquisition of key areas of Finnish territory would increase the Soviet Union's buffer against the

⁵⁹ See for example: Dmitry Shlapentokh, 'The Great Friendship: Geopolitical Fantasies About the Russia/Europe Alliance in the Early Putin Era (2000–2008) – The Case of Alexander Dugin', *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2014, pp. 49-79.

⁶⁰ Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, 'Russian Views of the International Order', RAND Research Report, 2017.

⁶¹ Marek Menkiszak, *Greater Europe: Putin's Vision of the European (Dis)integration*, OSW Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2013). Available at: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/book-detail?id=550644>

⁶² 'The draft of the European Security Treaty', November 29, 2009. Accessed at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152>

⁶³ Shawn Snow, 'The Real Russia Threat—And the Corps' Pivotal Plan for a European Fight', *Marine Corps Times*, June 11, 2018.

prospect of German aggression?⁶⁴ 'Maxmin' and 'minmax' theories of decision-making – i.e. maximizing the probability of success while minimizing the costs, or first minimizing the costs and then maximizing the probability of success – might suggest this would be the case.

Indeed, it would be all the more likely if the leadership's main aim was to pursue a 'short victorious' or diversionary war to improve its domestic standing. And yet, as occurred in Ukraine, domestic approval may be secured at the expense of international disapproval. Interestingly, in fictional accounts of a Soviet/Russian attack on NATO, this usually works in reverse, thus the far enemy must be defeated before the one closer to home can be tackled. In Clancy's *Red Storm Rising*, the Soviet Union must attack NATO because its real goal is to avoid economic ruin by acquiring Middle East energy resources. Soviet leaders fear that if they went after the Middle East first, this would leave an exposed flank. Hackett's version of the Third World War is also initiated by the Soviets out of a sense of weakness. Having calculated that the global 'correlation of forces' is not working in their favor, and beset by domestic problems, Moscow chooses to attack NATO in order to redress its struggling international position and regain control at home. A similar reason for undertaking military action against NATO also appears in General Shirreff's *2017 War with Russia*.

Attacking the far enemy before attacking the near enemy is fraught with risks, not the least of which is that the far enemy proves more difficult to defeat than anticipated, thereby exacerbating and/or distracting from the problems closer to home. Similar to the idea of a two-front war, the enemy on one front (external) needs to be defeated quickly, otherwise the enemy on the other front (domestic) will take advantage of this, leaving aside further complications that may emerge from two-external fronts (NATO and China), or three if one considers the possibility of Ukraine and Georgia seeking to make military gains whilst Russia is distracted with a major war, plus the prospect of home front opposition. There are many reasons why short wars are more attractive than long ones, especially from Russia's perspective, not the least of which is the prospect of waging a multi-front war. Donnelly has observed about Putin that 'as a good student of Marx, he knows that, when the chips are down, then in any conflict with the West in which the West has time to mobilise and operationalise its many advantages, Russia will lose'.⁶⁵

In the Soviet period, society was 'structurally militarized', with a large standing army supported by large reserves of trained manpower, large stockpiles of equipment, as well as an economy, defence industry and government apparatus that was prepared for the transition to war. Despite this favourable strategic position, Soviet leaders remained concerned about over-extension, and especially about a multi-front war. Today's Russia, with a much smaller standing army, fewer reserves of trained

⁶⁴ *Carl Van Dyke, The Soviet Invasion of Finland 1939-1940* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997).

⁶⁵ Christopher Donnelly, 'War in Peacetime: Ambiguous Warfare and the Resurgence of the Russian Military', COMEC Occasional Paper No. 9, Council of Military Education Committees of the Universities of the United Kingdom, 2017, p. 21.

manpower relative to Soviet times, surrounded in large part by weak, though usually subservient states, two of whom have recent unresolved military disputes with Russia, and a more militarily powerful China along its Far Eastern border, has that much more reason for concern, although in recent years it has emphasized measures to prepare the economy and maintain the country's power structures in the event of war, or at least during a national crisis, which is viewed as increasingly likely given the 'changes in the world order'.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, whereas the conduct of defensive campaigns presents a particular set of challenges and requirements that Russia currently seems to be preparing for, a very different set of challenges and requirements must be considered if they were contemplating an offensive campaign.

Visions of Peace

As Russian political and military leaders are aware of their inability to sustain offensive operations in one theater for a long period of time without risking problems elsewhere this effectively rules out large wars for large goals. In theory, for Russian military action to have any success against a foe that can bring more resources to bear over time, this necessitates that it is able to win a victory quickly, for limited gains, and then immediately sue for peace. It is this last aspect which is tricky, for capturing limited territory in a short period of time is relatively easy, but translating that into longer-term success is difficult. Is it plausible? And more to the point, would Kremlin decision-makers believe it to be so? It may be the case that Russian military leaders convince the politicians that this is possible, even when the generals themselves remain dubious. In 1914, German military leaders such as Helmuth von Moltke were outwardly optimistic about their prospects for waging a short war despite entertaining private doubts.⁶⁷ Alternatively, Russian leaders might become overconfident about their prospects simply by taking at face value many of the Western scenarios that demonstrate how easy it would be to wage a successful short war against NATO.

Given how relatively little Russia could expect to achieve in physical terms, this begs the question of what useful purpose would be served by initiating an attack? Ultimately it comes down to a question of whether the action taken is able to wound fatally NATO, or merely to poke it, thus risking enraging it. If the action is able to *kill* NATO, or at least to divide it internally to such an extent that it is not capable of concerted action, so that Russia can secure the captured territory, or at least to obtain other diplomatic

⁶⁶ Julian Cooper, 'If War Comes Tomorrow: How Russia Prepares for Possible Armed Aggression', Whitehall Report 4-16, RUSI, August 2016. The quote comes from a 2014 Putin statement, and is referenced in Andrew Monaghan, 'Putin's Way of War: The "War" in Russia's "Hybrid Warfare"', *Parameters*, Vol. 45, No. 4, Winter 2015-2016, p. 71.

⁶⁷ Holger H. Herwig, 'Germany and the 'Short War' Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?' *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 66, July 2002, pp. 681-694. As Herwig notes: 'Put bluntly, to concede that the vaunted Prussian General Staff could no longer conduct short wars of annihilation was to admit that war had ceased to be a viable option for the state by the start of the twentieth century'. p. 688

objectives by bargaining for the captured territory, then this might appear attractive to Russian leaders. It may also appear too optimistic to be realistic, requiring a very low opinion of the NATO adversary.

Indeed, the opinion would be so low as not only to be completely out of character for Russian political and military leaders, but if their opinion of NATO was so low, then there would seem little reason to view the Alliance as a threat requiring a potentially risky and expensive war to neutralize. But assuming that Russia does not expect NATO to be *killed* as a result of the military aggression, any prospect of victory would depend on the ability to seize the designated objectives, and a speedy diplomatic process associated with conflict termination and a return to normality. After all, militaries tend to assume the worst about an adversary rather than the best, unless of course one gains so many victories that one becomes overconfident in one's own superior abilities. Leaving aside best-case assumptions, Russian leaders will assume that NATO, or some ad hoc military coalition of NATO members, is likely to become physically stronger after the initial shock, whereas Russia will only become weaker. It is for this reason that not only must the military conquest be achieved quickly, but so must the diplomatic process. Moreover, would Russia have the expectation that anything other than a temporary ceasefire would result? In such circumstances, a stronger, more alert NATO would be in a better position for a resumption of hostilities. A decision for war is therefore more likely to be forthcoming depending on the prospects of achieving a favorable and speedy long-lasting peace.

Two examples from the Middle East provide an illustration of the *fait accompli* strategy – one successful, the other unsuccessful. In 1967, Israel's blitzkrieg operation decisively defeated the armed forces of its adversaries and seized physical objectives that were militarily defensible (the east bank of the Suez Canal and the Golan Heights). Israel was then able to bargain from a position of strength.⁶⁸ By the seventh day, Egypt simply did not have the military capacity to attempt a re-crossing of the Suez, nor could Syria retake the Golan. Acquiring this capability would take years. And even when the Egyptians were able to re-cross the canal in 1973, they did so on the assumption they would make a limited incursion into the Sinai followed by a switch to defensive operations whilst diplomacy took its course. Egypt's failure is usually attributed to its decision to support their faltering Syrian allies by advancing further into the Sinai than originally planned, leading to over-extension and gaps the Israelis were able to exploit.

I have used these examples to highlight the sort of script one might have in mind when discussing a *fait accompli* strategy. However, there are at least three problems with this strategy. In the first place, it never proved sufficiently attractive for the Soviet Union/Warsaw Pact to attempt with NATO. Despite

⁶⁸ This point was raised in relation to NATO by General Sir John Hackett in his 'Defining the true purpose of NATO: What should be understood', Letter to the Editor of *The Times*, 6 February 1968.

NATO defence planners' fears of a Soviet blitzkrieg that would end at the Rhine, with Soviet forces dug in on the east bank and negotiating from a position of strength, the Soviet leadership never chose to take the risk. One of the most interesting and debatable questions to emerge from the Cold War was why this type of military operation was never attempted. Was the fear of nuclear escalation the determining factor or were there other reasons why the Soviets did not wish to take the risk? Secondly, the natural barrier of the Rhine was fundamental to the scenario, although any other piece of defensible strategic geography could easily substitute. Thirdly, the scenario is predicated on a limited offensive operation, followed by a quick shift to the defence as diplomacy is used to achieve some gains. Successful diplomatic negotiations are therefore central to the success of the undertaking as a whole. The Middle East was a special case in the sense that it was assumed by the Israelis in 1967 and the Egyptians in 1973 that superpower intervention, as well as international intervention more generally, would be forthcoming almost automatically upon the outbreak of hostilities. In the case of a NATO-Russia conflict the diplomatic dynamics would be far more complex. With whom would Russia negotiate: the US president, the NATO Secretary General, the President of the European Commission or President of the European Council, and so on? Ironically, even if military action is intended to lead to the dissolution of NATO, Russia would still need a bargaining partner, presumably still NATO, to achieve a ceasefire, let alone some permanent peace arrangement.

The interest in peace requires positive answers to two questions. First, can the Russian leadership feel confident that their gains would be both attainable and secure (i.e. not amenable to revision, at least not in the short- to near-term)? A second, related, question, is whether the Russian leadership feel confident that any negotiation will be a speedy one, for just as long drawn out military campaigns are not sustainable, long drawn out negotiations do not work in Russia's favor either. This second question then begs a further question – how would Russia design both its military campaign and its diplomatic campaign to achieve a meaningful victory, or rather, to avoid defeat being grabbed from the jaws of victory. The answer is partly a matter of engineering (who does the negotiating, when and where) and some idea of peace terms that would be acceptable to NATO. Put another way, Russia would be forced to calculate under what circumstances and on what terms NATO would accept defeat. As for what NATO would be surrendering, Russia would either insist on recognition of territorial conquest, or might seek gains in some other diplomatic area, such as substantive changes in the NATO-Russia relationship, concessions on arms control, and so on.

Decision Dilemmas of Lesser and Greater Conflicts

As one of the most significant ongoing policy and academic debates surrounding the nature and character of the 'Russia threat' to NATO is over the use of what is popularly referred to as 'hybrid war',

and the related 'Gerasimov Doctrine',⁶⁹ though rather than get into a semantic debate I shall simply refer to it as a level of conflict below that of outright military aggression, it makes sense to touch on the similarities and differences of the two types of conflict in relation to decision-making. Are 'lesser' types of conflict easier to decide on? Do they involve a very different set of considerations? Lacking any hard evidence to go on, I can only assume that the answer to the first question is *somewhat*, whereas the answer to the second is a resounding *yes*.

As with any type of conflict, there is always the risk of escalation and efforts to minimize this risk. Other problems associated either with the likelihood of lesser types of conflict being able to achieve their intended goals, the specific choice of methods to be employed within a prescribed spectrum of options, or merely choosing this type due to the lack of better alternatives, will almost certainly feature as part of any decision to pursue them. Assuming of course that such types of conflict have been pursued and are found to be ineffective, does the threat of military aggression suddenly become a more attractive option? One should not of course conclude that this is necessarily an either/or decision. Instead it is more of a supported/supporting decision. The threat of military aggression can be used to support subversive activities, and subversive activities would probably be intensified rather than reduced if acting in support of military aggression.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the 'threat of force' and the 'use of force' must be placed in separate categories. Under no circumstances would military aggression be viewed as an attractive option. It is an option that is only seriously considered as a last resort, with lesser options having already been pursued and found to be ineffective. Therefore, the question is really one of identifying at what point Russian policymakers would conclude that their subversive activities have failed potentially leading them to raise the military aggression option. This raises an interesting policy dilemma for NATO. How far should it go in countering Russia's subversive activities? If it is too successful, might it not encourage rather than discourage military action? Is it even hypothetically possible for NATO to control the degree of its counter-actions to ensure that Russia can claim a few tactical victories whilst still being denied its strategic objective? There is no easy answer to this dilemma.

Up to this point, nuclear weapons have not featured prominently in this discussion – what might seem like an obvious omission for the 'elephant in the room'. Therefore, a brief discussion of the role of

⁶⁹ See for instance: General of the Army Valery Gerasimov, translated by Harold Orenstein, 'Contemporary Warfare and Current Issues for the Defense of the Country', *Military Review*, November-December 2017; Mark Galeotti, 'The Mythical "Gerasimov Doctrine" and the Language of Threat', *Critical Studies on Security*, 2018.

⁷⁰ According to SACEUR General Curtis Scaparrotti, "In my view they are executing a destabilization campaign, based on a strategy that assumes if they can destabilize Western governments it will be to Russia's benefit. If you look at their military doctrine, that is part of what they call 'indirect activity.' They believe undermining Western governments without ever firing a shot achieves their ends." See: James Kitfield, 'NATO Ops Center Goes 24/7 To Counter Russians: Gen. Scaparrotti', *Breaking Defense*, 1 October 2018. Can be accessed at: <https://breakingdefense.com/2018/10/nato-ops-center-goes-24-7-to-counter-russians-gen-scaparrotti/>

nuclear weapons in Russian decision-making, as it would pertain to a war with NATO, is essential, though I would argue, much less relevant than might otherwise be considered the case. There are no plausible circumstances where Russia would initiate the use of nuclear weapons as part of an attack against NATO as no useful political purpose would be served. To put it more precisely, no use that would kill lots of people would be conducted, although use at sea or in space might remain a possibility. In theory, any such decision to use nuclear weapons against land targets would be separate from a decision to launch a conventional attack of the sort that has been discussed here. Risks of nuclear escalation might feature in any internal Russian debate about undertaking an attack on NATO, but any decision on nuclear use would only occur in the course of a conflict, perhaps if NATO was winning the conventional war, or if NATO was perceived to be preparing for nuclear use itself, rather than in support of the initial Russian conventional assault.

The prospect of Russia using nuclear weapons ‘in retreat’ and the focus this has received in Western commentary has distracted attention from a more fundamental issue. Nuclear weapons might be the means chosen to avoid defeat, but the bigger question has to do with what Russian policymakers believe constitutes defeat. Only then does the question arise of what are the most appropriate means to avoid defeat, which in the case of any discussion of nuclear use, relative to other options, almost certainly raises the problem of creating an infinitely much worse situation by breaking the nuclear taboo. For Russian decision-makers contemplating military aggression, is anything less than total victory acceptable? How would they define defeat? And would a partial success, or partial defeat, depending on one’s view, be acceptable? If nuclear use is contemplated, would this not automatically constitute a reflection of failure? Moreover, would not nuclear use be ruled out as a means of extricating oneself from the mess one’s created, given that it is almost certain to create a much greater mess?

As far as any discussion of nuclear use in the Russian decision to launch an attack on NATO is concerned, these would likely feature in the broader discussion about NATO's defensive capabilities, as well as complementary military and diplomatic measures needed to ensure NATO refrained from nuclear use.⁷¹ Unlike during the Cold War, when NATO was more likely to use nuclear weapons on its own territory if faced with being overrun, this is simply unthinkable today. The Russian military is not large enough to make deep inroads into NATO territory. Instead, the size and scale of any operation would be on a far smaller scale than was expected during the Cold War, thus not putting NATO's political authorities in the position to have to decide on initial use of nuclear weapons.

⁷¹ Some similarities can be found in the discussion of nuclear and non-nuclear states initiating military aggression against nuclear powers. T.V. Paul, ‘Nuclear Taboo and War Initiation in Regional Conflicts’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 1995, pp. 696–717.

On the other hand, limiting discussion of nuclear use to that of detonating nuclear weapons misses another very important 'use' of these weapons, namely the 'threat of use' for psychological intimidation purposes. Here a number of crucial and sensitive decisions would need to be made by the highest authority, the most important being those to do with the issuing of nuclear threats, and any changes to the country's nuclear alert status and possible movement of nuclear-capable forces. Soviet/Russian leaders have made many nuclear threats during peacetime but doing so in the course of a military conflict with NATO is something they have not done and therefore would be qualitatively different from their earlier experience. The risks of making nuclear threats, much less increasing the alert status of their nuclear forces, would be substantial, among which are raising the nuclear status of the US strategic forces, and possibly those of other NATO members as well. The primary aim of taking these actions would be to make NATO members think twice before seeking to repel a Russian invasion. It might therefore appear an attractive option, at least for the short-term benefits it potentially offers.

Although one cannot exclude the prospect that Russian policymakers would view it in these positive terms, it is worth recalling that the use of nuclear threats being used in the course of seizing territory, in contrast to defending territory, and communicating to an opponent that if they choose to resist aggression they face nuclear annihilation, would hold enormous consequences for any state making such threats, especially over the longer-term. Yet assuming the Russian leadership was prepared to take such risks, they would also probably seek to ensure that their threats were taken seriously. How would they do this in such a way as to minimize the international political fallout, much less provoking escalatory moves by the US/NATO? This would require decisions about the substance of the messages to be communicated – e.g. the setting of 'red lines' and clearly stating the consequences of violating them – and who and how to communicate those messages – e.g. to the US, NATO, publicly or privately.

The Limits of Conflict

Decisions on the geographic limitations of different types and levels of violence will be among the most contentious issues facing the Russian policymaking system. I deliberately distinguish here between a single Russian policy-maker, and the Russian policymaking system more broadly, as the issues involved are too complex for any single person, and this is precisely the sort of area where the bureaucracy, especially the military bureaucracy, would need clear rules of engagement. This is also related to decisions about issues of command and control, but reference to this will be made later. For the moment, the problem of who to target, who not to target, and how to target will be addressed.

In a scenario involving some physical seizure of Baltic states' territory, we can distinguish between several categories of targeting. It is doubtful that there would be any issue with attacking the military personnel of the Baltic states themselves. As already discussed, there might be a reluctance to attacking

the NATO contingents located in the Baltic states and killing their personnel, perhaps with an effort made to bypass them or to capture, hold hostage, and bargain for their release. Questions about use of force against the civilian population would also need to be dealt with. Beyond the immediate conflict zone are the policy dilemmas associated with attacking NATO territory and military assets. For example, will NATO warships be targeted? Will key ports and other critical infrastructure be targeted, and if so, by conventional weapons, by 'deniable' saboteurs, cyberattacks, or some other means? If military aggression is intended to divide NATO, will certain NATO members be targeted whereas others will not; for instance, would those countries that are more pro-Russian (or less anti-Russian) be spared attack? Will some be at the receiving end of 'kinetic' weapons, whereas others might only have to contend with cyber-attacks? Part of the problem inherent in making these decisions is potentially dealing with a wide range of bureaucratic actors. It is not simply a matter to be dealt with by the Russian military, much less the operational commander. At stake are numerous political issues that require diplomatic and intelligence (esp. covert action) expertise and coordination, have implications for internal and external propaganda, and so forth.

Would the type of attack be defined by the narrative used to justify it, would the narrative simply justify the attack, or would the two interact in some fashion? The issue of narrative is directly connected to decisions on geography and types of violent and non-violent methods to employ and will almost certainly present Russian policymakers with some important dilemmas. For example, assume that the purpose of Russia's military action is to lead to the dissolution of NATO. Does Russia state this as its explicit purpose, or does it merely hope this will be the result of a different aim it claims to be pursuing? Thus, might Russia claim to be coming to the aid of oppressed ethnic Russians as a pretext, but really have a different goal in mind? And even if they did have a more expansive goal in mind, might they not find themselves constricted in their range of actions by their official narrative? Or, assuming that Russia was explicit in its stated objective, the dissolution of NATO, would they not also complement this publicly by articulating some sort of plan for a new post-war security arrangement?

As far as the type of conflict is concerned and touching on some of the points associated with geographic scope and narrative, there are many other practical issues that would need to be considered by the Russian leadership, but it will suffice to point out just a few examples. Would Moscow attempt to pursue a military conflict in one geographic vicinity whilst attempting to pretend everything else is normal? For example, would it expel the diplomats of NATO countries,⁷² cut off energy supplies, trade and other physical links with the West? To the extent any conflict can be waged whilst life carries on as before, this would of course be the ideal. But, is such a prospect likely? Assuming part of Russia's attack includes cyber-attacks on the civilian or civil-military infrastructure of NATO countries, might it not be

⁷² The different approaches to this issue are explored in: G.R. Berridge, *Embassies in Armed Conflict* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

presupposed that NATO would seek to do the same in Russia? If Western countries detained and then expelled all Russian diplomats, would not Russia be forced to do the same? Could the Russian authorities guarantee that Russia itself would be treated as a 'sanctuary', and if not, are they prepared for the consequences? At the very least, Russia would assume international sanctions on a scale far heavier than that which resulted from the annexation of Ukraine.

Analogical Reasoning

One of the problems in any Russian decision to attack NATO has to do with the 'leap into the unknown' factor. Fear about leaping into the unknown, especially given the stakes, almost always serves to induce caution rather than recklessness. It is one thing if there are precedents of successful action that then lead to hubris when making decisions about waging war. Yet regardless of whether or not successful precedents exist that bear any relation to the pending problem, decision-making, especially in a group, will typically involve some reference to the past, with some historical precedent used to provide a cognitive script and in some cases, a 'battle of analogies' erupts as policymakers refer to different analogies or hold different interpretations of the same analogy. In the case of a Russian decision to attack NATO, what analogy or analogies might serve to guide its actions?

As the choice of analogy is usually something that is personally familiar to the decision-maker or decision-makers – something they have personally experienced, would have learned about in school or is a common cultural reference point – this can be narrowed down, in this context, to a conflict from Russia's own past, be it from the Tsarist, Soviet or post-Soviet periods. Although the choice of analogy should bear some relation to the policy options being debated, there is no guarantee of this. Often the choice of analogy has to do with its ability to persuade others, or to convince oneself, of the rightness or feasibility of a given course of action, and therefore positive analogies, or analogies with a positive spin or narrative placed upon them, will be used in support of an action, whereas negative analogies will be used as a means of dissuading action. Furthermore, the analogical choices of Russian policymakers may very well be different from the analogies Western analysts attribute to them. For instance, in many contemporary discussions of a NATO-Russia conflict, Russian actions are characterized as part of an A then B then C sequence: Georgia then Ukraine then the Baltics – as if Russian leaders will automatically utilize the most successful recent precedents to guide any action they may take in the Baltics. The logic of this sequence is not guaranteed and is highly questionable as it presupposes the Russian leadership would view their military confrontations with Georgia and Ukraine in the same way as they would view a potential NATO adversary. There are many reasons to be highly skeptical of this.

The historical record since NATO's founding in 1949 would seem to indicate that Soviet and Russian leaders were conscious to treat NATO as a separate kettle of fish compared to their military interventions elsewhere. At best, the experience of Hungary in 1956 might, at some level, have informed the Soviet approach to the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia, those two interventions to the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, or the 2008 conflict in Georgia might have informed Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, but there is little evidence that the Soviets ever believed that the successful intervention in Czechoslovakia, for instance, would serve as a useful analogy for the invasion of West Germany.

Especially as it related to a war with NATO, the Soviet analogical preference was fairly consistent, namely to refer back to the experience of the Great Patriotic War. The use of this analogy was probably the result of a combination of two factors: it was a conflict on a size and scale that might approximate a conflict with NATO, and it was an analogy that was personally familiar to the senior leadership of the Soviet army through the bulk of the Cold War since most of them had participated in it. The present Russian leadership would still be familiar with the Great Patriotic War from their experience in school and because of its place in Russian culture, but they will not have the same personal connection as did the Soviet generals during the Cold War. One further problem of the Great Patriotic War analogy, especially during the Cold War, as a guide to offensive action, was that, apart from warning against the prospect of being surprised, and therefore offering a justification for a pre-emptive attack, it was more useful as a guide to defending against an attack and then going onto the offensive, rather than as a guide to actually initiating aggression. Soviet military science, which has guided post-Soviet Russian military science, largely drew its lessons from the Great Patriotic War, and may therefore still have some relevance for current thinking as it pertains to NATO.

Though a skeptic might argue that the lessons of the Great Patriotic War would hold little relevance for a contemporary policy debate involving 'little green men', 'fake news', 'cyber weapons', and so on, it is often the case that to the extent these analogies have relevance for contemporary debates, they either contain elements that are similar, or can be appropriated for the present provided that variations in technological and other circumstances are accounted for. As far as the Russian military is concerned, the Great Patriotic War is part of its DNA. By contrast, those Russian policymakers with a background in the intelligence and security services are likely to approach the idea of a war with NATO from a very different historical vantage point. It is also entirely plausible that the analogy of earlier Soviet occupations of the Baltic states, in 1940 and 1944 respectively, might serve as a partial guide.

The Vulnerability Factor

Finally let us conduct a thought experiment. Assume Vladimir Putin has just read the RAND wargame scenario in which Russia emerges victorious. Why might he be reluctant to immediately order his

General Staff to prepare to launch an attack on NATO based on the same script? Quite a few reasons suggest themselves. For starters, his assessment of Russia's relations with the West will almost certainly be less stark than that featured in the scenario. An attack might seem to be overkill. Putin would also probably want some assurance from his own General Staff that the RAND scenario was not an American trick designed to lure Russia into a military disaster. Even if persuaded that the scenario was a sound one, from a military perspective at least, he might want some further investigation into what happens once the scenario ends. Will Russia's position in the world be that much better off in eight days, or eight months, than if some other course is chosen? How much will it cost the Russian treasury? Over the following months and years, how well will Russia be able to subdue the Estonians and Latvians and integrate them into the Russian Federation, or to maintain a semi-independent status with an imposed pro-Russian government?⁷³ What will NATO do over the long term, assuming NATO has not dissolved? Will NATO simply accept the military defeat and take no further action? Will NATO members reduce their defense budgets or radically increase them? How will the EU react? How will China? How many troops would it be prudent for Russia to maintain indefinitely at full combat readiness along the border with Lithuania to counter any potential NATO effort to recover them? How will the Russian 'aggressor' break its international isolation? If Russia can win so easily, might it be worthwhile attacking all three Baltic states instead of just the two? Or might it simply be easier to go after one? Leaving aside any reservations Putin might have about the ability of his own military system to carry out a text-book attack, and leaving aside any other problems associated with defeating the NATO forces and capturing Estonia and Latvia, the sheer number of unknown, and mostly undesirable consequences resulting from a *successful* attack would almost certainly lead the Russian president to pause and reflect carefully on the choice he was making.

The discussion above about the possibility of a successful scenario serving as a script for policy action, or having no effect on policy action as the case may be, actually reflects a more general problem with war scenarios. During the late 1970s, a number of American analysts focused on the problem of US Minuteman ICBM vulnerability, and constructed a scenario, informally known as the 'Nitze scenario', named after Paul Nitze, in which the Soviet Union would launch a bolt-from-the-blue surprise nuclear attack that eliminated the US ICBM force, constituting 20% of the US nuclear arsenal. This then leads to a US surrender. Although I have oversimplified here, the important point is that the Soviet Union, having become aware of the 'Nitze scenario' showed absolutely no inclination to launch a 'bolt from the blue' attack, confident that this would result in a Soviet victory, and presumably world domination. As Benjamin Lambeth observed:

⁷³ One can even speculate about some type of neo-Finlandization. For a recent discussion of the origins of this concept and present-day references to it, see: Tapio Juntunen, 'Helsinki Syndrome: The Parachronistic Renaissance of Finlandization in International Politics', *New Perspectives*, 2017, Vol. 25, No.1, pp. 55-83.

If Soviet decision-makers draw any political comfort from this US liability, it probably derives more from official US expressions of anxiety than from any independent technical evaluations of their own counterforce capabilities. Their uncertainties about how successful a Soviet disarming attack might be, rather than any vicarious reassurance from US manifestations of nervousness about Minuteman survivability, would probably play the commanding role in any Soviet consideration of the first-strike option in a crisis.⁷⁴

Countless other 'less dramatic' scenarios – i.e. those not resulting in millions, tens of millions, or hundreds of millions of deaths – also rarely have a habit of leading to policy action, not for the least of reasons that, on the one hand they are probably not intended for policy action, but more importantly, the reaction of most policymakers after looking at these scenarios is to treat them as fiction rather than as a serious guide to policy. For instance, the prospect of General Robert Close's blueprint for a Soviet victory ever being taken seriously by Leonid Brezhnev and the Politburo was virtually nil.

CONCLUSION

The approach I have taken in this paper could be criticized on several grounds. I will address these here, though it is important to emphasize that my aim was simply to open up more avenues of inquiry; it was not intended to be a comprehensive examination of the subject. For many readers, the points I have raised may seem too abstract to serve as a meaningful guide, and admittedly the vast majority of questions I have asked are almost certainly unanswerable. The only defence I can offer is that the nature of the subject is abstract, and as for the questions, it is more important that we find the right questions to ask, and not only focus on those we think we can answer.

Another criticism is that I have focused too much on 'premeditated' or 'rational' aggression as opposed to that which might occur in a crisis situation where 'pre-emptive' or 'accidental' conflict may be more likely. Clearly, in these other types of aggression, the circumstances would be very different, all the more so if both sides had already mobilized, leaders felt they were being backed into a corner and had to fight despite the added complications of an alert adversary, and so on. A similar criticism is that I have assumed Russian policymakers will behave rationally. Might not an irrational decision be possible?

The short answer is: yes in theory, but unlikely in practice. Here I would distinguish between the following alternatives that might produce an irrational decision: a combination of rational decision-makers and an irrational process, irrational decision-makers and an irrational process, or irrational decision-makers overriding a rational process. Waging war may also be seen as rational in the short-term even if irrational in the longer-term, and therefore would be attractive to a leadership that was only interested in short-term gains. Alternatively, the leadership may be interested in long-term gains

⁷⁴ Benjamin S. Lambeth, 'Risk and Uncertainty in Soviet Deliberations About War', R-2687-AF, RAND, October 1981, p. vi.

and are less concerned that the conflict is irrational in the short-term. Finding historical examples that fit any of these is difficult to do for the straightforward reason that decisions that seem irrational in retrospect, or even by critics at the time, are not seen that way by those who make them, and in any event, reliable judgements about what constitutes rationality or irrationality is not only subjective, but more to the point, is dependent on a perfect understanding of the actual as opposed to the stated motives driving an action. This distinction in motives is important because the two may be in sync, but all too often there is good reason to suspect they are not.

I have also mainly limited myself to exploring middle-range conventional scenarios as opposed to scenarios involving nuclear weapons, at the high end, or skirmishes involving conventional forces at the lower end. The reasons for this focus on middle-range scenarios have to do with the context of the current policy debate, which is very much focused on these as well, and which I am seeking to engage with. And although reluctant to go down the nuclear path as some have already done,⁷⁵ largely on the grounds that I find it more productive to concentrate on weapons that are used in practice as opposed to those that have not been used since 1945, I would agree that more attention is needed on the lower-end skirmishes.

Geographically, the Baltic states have received the bulk of attention in this paper despite the fact I have argued these scenarios should *not* dominate discussion of the Russia threat. I would argue though that the majority of problems identified here would probably apply in other locales. The type of conflict, not the location, is the critical point. One key area I have omitted, however, is any speculation of geopolitical or military-technical developments that could significantly change the dynamics of the scenarios under discussion. This is an area requiring future attention.

Finally, the decision-making process and issues that are described here draw their inspiration from a combination of generic political science perspectives with the occasional reference to Soviet/Russian and other historical examples. They are not the perspectives of a Russia studies scholar, an expert on contemporary Russian Government decision-making, much less those of someone with any particularly useful insights about President Putin. A cross-fertilization of perspectives would be extremely helpful and these are conversations that should ideally happen, but they are not ones I have attempted to capture here. They are also the perspectives of an outsider, removed from the NATO policy, military and intelligence communities, and geographically removed from the Russian border. Where one sits

⁷⁵ See for instance the discussion of Russia's 'theory of victory' in Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015). Actually, what Roberts describes is less a 'theory of victory', but closer to a 'theory of stalemate' or 'defeat avoidance'.

will obviously affect what one sees. In this regard, I can only hope that an outsider's view can be appreciated for the value it offers.

The approach I have taken, with its emphasis focused on a 'war frame of mind' rather than a 'battle frame of mind', as it relates to the decision-making of political leaders, specifically contemporary Russian ones, may be criticized on the basis that such an approach gives these decision-makers far more to consider in theory than they would in practice. This would be all the more likely if the decision for war were made in the midst of a crisis, rather than in a peacetime or stable environment in which a great deal of thought could go into these matters, perhaps with a fully integrated war plan that only needed a leader's signature or verbal authorization to implement. It is perfectly true that in practice policy goalposts are constantly shifting, that calculations can change quite rapidly depending on the moves of the opponent.

Yet it is also true that at some point, a conscious decision for war, even under complicated circumstances, is still required to set the war machine in motion. In such circumstances, it may well be the case that a leader fails to think two, three or four moves ahead, but can only manage to think through the opening move. Furthermore, it may be the case that rather than letting political, diplomatic, economic and other factors shape his/her thinking, the leader's decision for war is limited to an assessment of the local military balance of forces. For sure, one cannot exclude this possibility. Moreover, some leaders may be prone to shortsightedness, misperception and hubris, or fall prey to a "Black Swan" type development. The same might even apply to the policy-making community that supports the leader. That being said, there is a great deal of historical experience to suggest that decisions for war are usually taken with a great deal of forethought and preparation, and the greater the stakes the more hesitancy and careful consideration of the consequences is evident. It is one thing to decide to attack much weaker opponents, especially when the consequences are deemed minimal. It is quite another to attack large opponents, especially when the consequences could be catastrophic.

The assumption of most non-Russian strategists, as can be discerned from the mainstream discourse and publicly available wargame scenarios, is that very little thought would go into a Russian decision to attack NATO. Such an assumption serves as a misleading and wholly inappropriate basis for assessing the 'Russia threat'. One cannot assume that Russia would behave completely irrationally. If one did assume this then one would have to also assume at least three other things.

First, if Russian leaders are irrational, then would they not use nuclear weapons? Second, if they are irrational, then deterrence is useless. Third, if they are irrational, why have they not attacked NATO already? It goes almost without saying that when we consider answers to these questions, the rationality of Russian leaders, or to put it more precisely, the Russian government (leaders + bureaucracy), becomes much more apparent. Clearly, war is not the first option to resolve political

disputes; national survival, political survival, and so forth are all factors that shape the means to be employed in war, when to go to war, and who to go to war with, or to avoid going to war with. Military systems are simply unable to go to war, at least not in any meaningful way, or with any chance of avoiding a crushing defeat, without clear direction from their political masters, and the support of the rest of the state. For any Russian battalion, brigade, army or other echelon commander, all the way up to the chief of the general staff, being ordered to attack NATO does not provide actionable guidance. Once this most elementary problem of military action is taken for granted, it can only be assumed that some decision will need to be made about where to attack, which will most likely turn on a calculation of where success is probable, or what objective is most desirable.

Therefore, when discussing a Russian decision to attack NATO, we are actually referring to a final decision preceded by a series of other decisions, and it is therefore essential to understand what sort of other decisions would need to be made, what essential issues would have to be dealt with, prior to a final decision. As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, there are quite a significant number of these decisions. Lots of decisions require lots of information, lots of contemplation, and potentially lots of decision-makers. It is therefore entirely plausible that the complexity of the decision-making process itself poses insurmountable problems, perhaps enough to guarantee that fairly early on in this process Russian leaders would discount the idea of attacking NATO. At the very least, if NATO wants to ensure that such a decision is never taken, if it wants to improve its own deterrent, and avoid actions that may increase the risks of war, then recognizing the importance of these decisions, and seeking to influence them, will be essential.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Isabelle Duyvesteyn, Marcus Faulkner, Peter Foot, Matt Ford, Tormod Heier, Dave Johnson, Andrew Monaghan, Marc Ozawa, Volker Pilz, Adam Svendsen, Chris Tripodi, and Katarzyna Zysk for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.