



Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej)

Publication details, including instructions for authors:
<http://www.iesw.lublin.pl/rocznik/index.php>

ISSN 1732-1395

NATO-Russia Balance of Deterrence in East-Central Europe

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Published online: 22 Nov 2017

To cite this article: R. Wiśniewski, 'NATO-Russia Balance of Deterrence in East-Central Europe', *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2017, pp. 99-122.

Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej) is a quarterly, published in Polish and in English, listed in the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH), Central and Eastern European Online Library (CEEOL) and IC Journal Master List (Index Copernicus International). In the most recent Ministry of Science and Higher Education ranking of journals published on the Polish market the Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe received one of the highest scores, i.e. 14 points.

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyze a crucial feature of East-Central Europe's (ECE) security environment—the balance of deterrence in NATO-Russia relations. This particular factor is the most influential among all on the regional order in the ECE. It stems from the fact that the Russian Federation is the preponderant military power in the region. The fear of possible Russian belligerence was the number one factor behind the desire of many countries in the region to join the Alliance. As a result, Russia and NATO constitute the most important actors in the regional security order in the ECE, a reality made even starker in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Since that began, the Russia-NATO relationship has turned antagonistic. As open military conflict has (for now) been precluded as an option by both sides, it is the balance of deterrence between them that drives the evolution of ECE security. This paper first establishes an understanding of what constitutes the balance of deterrence and which factors are most important for it. Then, it assesses the current balance by identifying both sides' aims and strategies. Finally, a picture of the impact of the balance on regional security emerges.

Keywords: NATO, Russia, deterrence, Eastern Flank

Introduction

In the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, the ECE¹ has enjoyed a discernible (if not complete) strengthening of political-military stability. Although the 1990s witnessed a spate of armed conflicts

1 For the purpose of this article the region of East-Central Europe is being understood in accordance with concepts of Oskar Halecki and Jerzy Kłoczowski as comprising current EU member states admitted in 2004 and 2007, as well as Slavic post-Soviet states of Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine. Cf. M. Filipowicz, 'The idea of East-Central Europe and its role in shaping the logic behind Eastern Partnership', *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, Vol. 14, No. 6, 2016, pp. 69-86; J. Kłoczowski, *Europa. Rzeczpospolita Wielu Narodów. Świadectwa, wywiady, przemówienia i szkice z lat 1990-2012* [Europe Republica of Many Nations. Testimonies, interviews, speeches and sketches from years 1990-2012], Lublin 2012.

stemming from the collapse of both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union (USSR), by the beginning of the new millennium, those antagonisms had been largely “frozen” and large-scale fighting ceased. At the same time, most states in the region significantly decreased their defense expenditure and military postures. That was possible mainly due to the quality of NATO-Russia relations. Although the relationship has taken many turns and had its share of disagreements or outright conflict, generally, for most of the post-Cold War period, a serious military confrontation between these two actors has not been seen as a realistic possibility. However, events in the first decade of the 21st century, specifically NATO enlargement to include many ECE countries² and Russia’s new assertiveness³ (as evidenced by its war with Georgia in 2008), have clearly established the strategic parameters of ECE security within primarily the state of NATO-Russia relations. The situation took a more dramatic turn at the turn of 2013 and 2014 when a serious political crisis in Ukraine deteriorated into full-fledged military conflict. The resulting sequence of military and political actions undertaken by Russia and the West brought the region into a state of significant military build-up and genuine political tension, accompanied by intense military maneuvering.

The Ukraine conflict clearly shows that the ECE (and specifically its post-Soviet part) is a crucial area to Russian national security thinking. At the same time, for practically all ECE countries, Russia is a permanent fixture of their security environment. The deeply held desire of many states of the region to join NATO has been construed primarily as a hedge against a possible resurgence of the “Russia threat.” All these linkages played out in the Ukraine crisis.

This paper aims to analyze the crucial feature of the ECE’s regional security environment, namely, the balance of deterrence in NATO-Russia relations. This factor is the most influential on the regional security order. It stems from the fact that Russia is the preponderant military power in the region. This capability, coupled with the Cold War (and earlier) history and experiences of post-Cold War relations,

2 R. D. Asmus, ‘Europe’s Eastern Promise’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 1, 2008, pp. 95-106.

3 A. E. Stent, ‘Restoration and Revolution in Putin’s Foreign Policy’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 6, 2008, pp. 1089-1106.

make Russia the single most important threat as perceived by the ECE members of NATO. The fear of Russian belligerence was the number one factor behind these countries' desire to join the Alliance. As a result, Russia and NATO constitute the most important actors in the regional security order, a reality made even starker in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. From that point, the Russia-NATO relationship turned antagonistic. As open military conflict has (for now) been precluded as an option by both sides, it is the balance of deterrence between them what drives the evolution of the ECE's security environment.

The main research problem this paper aims to address is: How does the balance of deterrence in Russia-NATO relations shape the current state and future trajectory of ECE security? To answer this question, several secondary questions need to be tackled:

What are the respective aims of Russian and NATO deterrence policy vis-a-vis one another?

What deterrence strategies have both sides employed to achieve them?

What is the balance of deterrence between Russia and NATO?

The paper will first establish an understanding of what constitutes the balance of deterrence and which factors are most important for it. Then, it will assess the current state of this balance by identifying both sides' aims and strategies. Finally, a picture of the impact of this balance on ECE security will emerge.

1. What constitutes balance of deterrence?

● According to the United States (US) Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, "deterrence" is defined as: "The prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits."⁴ The practice is as old as warfare and defense policy, however, it came into the scope of systematic scientific research in the Cold War years. In this section, the main forms, strat-

4 *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, as of March 2017, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/dictionary.pdf, p. 69, [2017-05-20].

egies and conditions of deterrence will be presented as background to further analysis.

Three main forms of deterrence can be identified: nuclear, conventional military and non-military. Deterrence is most commonly associated with nuclear weapons, which is natural considering that their enormous destructive potential makes them rather unwieldy weapons of war. Most of deterrence theory has been developed with nuclear deterrence in mind. Naturally, conventional military capabilities can also be used to deter an opponent. It can be argued that in the post-Cold War period, the focus of research and real policy-making has shifted towards conventional military deterrence.⁵ Non-military forms of deterrence are a relative novelty in the field but seem to offer an interesting road for further inquiry. This form of deterrence can include the threat of crippling economic sanctions (including the very salient issue of energy supplies). These are very relevant to the case examined in this article.

There are numerous deterrence strategies, but two strands developed in the Cold War years seem to be especially relevant for our deliberations. Although they deal with nuclear deterrence, they can easily be employed in the analysis of its conventional variant. These are “deterrence by punishment” and “deterrence by denial.”⁶ Both strategies aim to affect an opponent’s cost-benefit calculus of taking military action. Deterrence by punishment relies on the plausible threat of destructive retaliation. It supposes that even if the enemy is able to achieve some military objectives, such as striking the opposing side’s nuclear forces or capturing some territory, the deterring actor will still be able to deliver a punitive counterstrike leading to unacceptable losses on the attacker’s side. “Deterrence by denial,” meanwhile, aims to thwart an enemy attempting military action as it is happening. The threat is that the defenders can mount an effective defense, denying the attacker even preliminary success. Both strategies require different force postures. The first sets potentially a lower bar, requir-

5 M.S. Gerson, ‘Conventional Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age’, *Parameters*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2009, pp. 32-48.

6 S. Foerster, ‘Strategies of Deterrence’, in: S. Jasper (ed.), *Conflict and Cooperation in the Global Commons. A Comprehensive Approach for International Security*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012 [Kindle edition].

ing retaliatory capability that (in the case of conventional deterrence) can take some time to mobilize. The second strategy calls for a strong and active defense posture with forces able to effectively fight and win against an enemy from day one of the conflict.⁷

Throughout the years of research on deterrence, the scholarly community has identified and studied a range of factors that shape the effectiveness of deterrence policies. Paul K. Huth singled out four factors considered especially important by most scholars working on rational deterrence theory. These are: the military balance between the potential attacker and the defender, signaling and bargaining behavior, the defender's reputation and the interests at stake for both sides.⁸ These factors will be considered when assessing the balance of deterrence between Russia and NATO. The military balance is the first, as deterrence is basically another form of applying military force to achieve political ends (in this instance, without recourse to actual use). For deterrence to be effective, it must be backed by a military force of sufficient size, capacity, ability and structure to meet the needs of the employed deterrence strategy. Naturally, because deterrence is an interactive process, the aforementioned indicators of the defender force must be compared with their analogues on the opposing side.

Obviously, the material resources available to carry out a deterrence strategy are only one aspect of the entire deterrence equation. Since we are dealing with basically a psychological process, non-material factors are of at least equal importance (if not, arguably, of greater importance). Deterrence can be viewed as an exercise in altering an opponent's mindset regarding armed confrontation. For it to succeed, a defender's willingness to carry through with threats it issues must not be in question. When making a judgment about that, the latter three factors come into play. The character of national interests at stake in a given deterrence relationship is fundamentally important. States willing to go to extreme lengths to defend their vital national interests (such as national territory or a great power posi-

7 P.K. Davis, *Toward Theory for Dissuasion (or Deterrence) by Denial: Using Simple Cognitive Models of the Adversary to Inform Strategy*, RAND Working Paper, 2014, https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1027.readonline.html [2017-08-03].

8 P.K. Huth, 'Deterrence and International Conflict: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Debates', *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2, 1999, pp. 28-34.

tion). When stakes are lower, it is more difficult to convince the other side that significant costs will be incurred in defense of an object or cause not vital to the defender. This dilemma is especially acute in extended deterrence, when a state tries to deter an attack on an ally. Aside from the interests at stake, a reputation for resolve is another important indicator. This matter has been the subject of an intense scholarly debate. However, it seems safe to assume that a potential attacker is analyzing the past behavior of the deterrent actor to derive clues as to probability of it carrying out a threat. This resolve can be further proven through signaling, especially of the costly sort, understood as: “[...] those actions and statements that clearly increase the risk of a military conflict and also increase the costs of backing down from a deterrent threat, thereby revealing information about the actual commitment of a state to defend against an attack.”⁹ Bargaining is also an important element of deterrence relationships. As noted by Huth, “diplomatic policies that include elements of accommodation and positive inducements can significantly increase the likelihood of deterrence success. In particular, diplomatic policies that include flexibility and a willingness to compromise and negotiate on secondary issues, combined with a refusal to concede on vital security issues, increase the likelihood of deterrence success.”¹⁰

Based on a review of the literature, this author would like to include two additional factors influencing the deterrence relationship: the prospects frame of both parties and the issue of escalation dominance. Berejikian uses the assumptions of prospect theory to counter the deficiencies built into the rational choice theory.¹¹ His insight is that to judge the risk of one or more sides crossing the threshold of conflict, the level of their satisfaction with the status quo needs to be taken into consideration. If a state is satisfied with the status quo, it is in the “gain frame,” which means it is pursuing a net gains increase strategy. If the risk of incurring significant costs is large it will probably refrain from pursuing them. However, if the state is unsatisfied with the status quo, it is operating in the “loss frame.” That would amount

9 Ibid., p. 31.

10 Ibid., p. 38.

11 J.D. Berejikian, ‘A Cognitive Theory of Deterrence’, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2002.

to pursuing a net loss decrease strategy. If the actor believes its position will only weaken under the status quo, then riskier moves seem to be more attractive. To summarize, state leaders expecting further deterioration of their country's position under the status quo would be willing to take greater risks and thus be more immune to effective deterrence.

Looking at the history of strategic studies discipline, it seems almost impossible to discuss deterrence without recourse to the concept of escalation. The term itself can be defined as: "an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses a threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants."¹² The dynamics of escalation needs to be understood to assess the state of a deterrence relationship and forecast the direction of its future evolution. One of the key aspects is which side (if any) possesses "escalation dominance," understood as a "condition in which a combatant has the ability to escalate a conflict in ways that will be disadvantageous or costly to the adversary while the adversary cannot do the same in return, either because it has no escalation options or because the available options would not improve the adversary's situation."¹³ It is also commonly assumed that there are three basic forms of escalation: vertical (the usage of new forms of combat or an increase in the intensity of violence), horizontal (taking the conflict into a new geographical area), and political (a broader category encompassing the adoption of wider objectives or taking the conflict into new spheres such as targeting the civilian population or natural environment).¹⁴

To summarize this section, all the concepts and causal relationships developed in deterrence theory are subjects of fierce debate. They have been introduced here in a short manner to outline the analytical frames for further study. On the widest level, the study will be driven by the classical understanding of deterrence effectiveness formulated by Henry Kissinger: deterrence = capability x resolve x belief.¹⁵

12 F.E. Morgan et.al., *Dangerous Thresholds Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, RAND Corporation, 2008, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG614.pdf, p. 8, [2017-05-26].

13 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

15 H. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons & Foreign Policy*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969.

Taking this further, the aim of this paper is to assess the balance of deterrence in NATO-Russia relations, so it is necessary to explain how this concept is understood by the author. “Balance of deterrence” basically describes the relation of the effectiveness of deterrence policies adopted by two actors in a mutual deterrence relationship. At its widest interpretation, it can take three forms:

I. Effective mutual deterrence—the deterrence policies of both sides are working. Neither is willing to cross the other side’s “red lines.” Thus, the status quo is maintained and an uneasy peace prevails.

II. One-sided effectiveness—one side’s deterrence policy is working and keeps the other in check. At the same time, the second actor is unsuccessful in employing a working deterrence policy, so its interests are open to infringement by the opponent. This can lead to two possible outcomes—either one side (the one with an effective deterrence policy) achieves victory without a fight, or the losing side, seeing its red lines crossed, resorts to open conflict.

III. Mutual ineffectiveness—neither side’s deterrence policy is working. Both sides feel free to cross each other’s red lines. This most probably will lead to massive deterrence failure and open war.

To assess the balance of deterrence, we need to take several factors into consideration. They include: the aims both actors want to achieve through their respective deterrence policy, their adopted deterrence strategies, employed military capabilities and their suitability for a chosen strategy. Finally, the outcome will be highly dependent on each other’s perceptions that result from decision-makers’ application of a range of cognitive filters (available information, heuristics, biases, and intuitive thinking, values or the leaders’ personalities).¹⁶ The inclusion of cognitive factors makes the analysis more complicated and its results more uncertain compared to a situation in which material factors are treated as paramount. However, it is vital, for example, to judge the probability of the emergence of the security dilemma when either sides’ defensive moves could be misinterpreted by the other and lead to acute threat perceptions.¹⁷

¹⁶ P.K. Davies, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

2. Aims and Strategies of Russian and NATO Deterrence

To analyze the mutual deterrence policies of NATO and Russia, we need to identify the aims they serve. That requires an appreciation of the interests at stake in the relationship and their relevance to both actors. In reviewing strategic documents and declarations issued by both actors, it is possible to ascertain critical interests that animate their respective security policies.

In Russia's case, its security policy cannot be understood without reference to the characteristics of this state's political system. The autocratic regime led by President Putin is primarily concerned with its own survival. The National Security Strategy adopted by the Russian Federation in 2015 clearly positions the constitutional order as the most important value to be protected in defense of the country, before sovereignty and independence.¹⁸ The Military Doctrine adopted in 2014 states that an important external military threat is posed by actions (presumably by NATO/Western countries in general) "to destabilize the situation in individual countries and regions and undermine global and regional stability."¹⁹ Influential Russian military writings on the nature of contemporary armed conflicts stress Western countries' willingness and ability to enact "regime change."²⁰ All these threads, as well as an analysis of the deeper currents of Russian strategic culture²¹ point to the conclusion that the number one concern for the current regime in Russia is its own survival in the face of challenges inspired and directed from abroad (real or imagined).

Russia's second vital national interest concerns the maintenance of Moscow's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area. As indicated by the Ukraine case, the perceived expansion of Western influence into Russia's "near abroad" may be met with armed force. It is important to

18 *Russian National Security Strategy*, December 2015—Full-text Translation, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>, art. 30, [2017-06-05].

19 *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2014*, (English translation), <http://pl.scribd.com/doc/251695098/Russia-s-2014-Military-Doctrine#scribd> [2015-09-12].

20 M. Galeotti, 'The "Gerasimov Doctrine" and Russian Non-Linear War', in: *In the Moscow's Shadows*, 6-07-2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/> [2015-09-12]; S.G. Chekinov, S.A. Bogdanov, 'The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War', *Military Thought*, No. 4, 2013.

21 T. Graham, 'The Sources of Russia's Insecurity', *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2010.

remember that for Russian leaders, the post-Soviet states (like Ukraine) are not entirely foreign neighboring states. They are considered parts of a wider geopolitical entity that is (or should be) inextricably tied to Russia. For that reason, the expansion of NATO and the EU into the post-Soviet area (beyond the Baltic states, which are already members of both organizations) is considered an infringement on vital Russian security interests. This is closely linked to the primary interest of regime survival. In the minds of Russian leaders, the political transformation of the post-Soviet states towards the Western model (through so-called “color revolutions”) is part of a Western strategy leading to the logical conclusion of regime change in Moscow.

The third important national interest influencing the direction of Russian defense policy is the maintenance (or maybe the restoration) of great power status. The 2015 National Security Strategy lists “consolidating the Russian Federation’s status as a leading world power, whose actions are aimed at maintaining strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world” as a crucial interest.²² Standing tall in the international system is regarded by the Russian leadership as an important element of internal political legitimacy but also a necessary reversal of Russia’s unacceptable post-Cold War deterioration.

To sum up, Russian foreign and security policy (and consequentially, deterrence policy for its part) aims primarily to protect the current regime’s hold on power (vital interest). This is closely connected to stopping any further Western expansion in Russia’s post-Soviet sphere of special interest and influence (another vital interest). Both are supported by nurturing Russia’s great power position (an important interest). Based on that, we can reasonably claim that Russian deterrence policy is aimed at dissuading NATO states from supporting any challenge to the rule of Putin’s regime and expanding their political, economic, military and (last but not least) ideational influence deeper into the post-Soviet sphere. Additionally, it compels its opposites to recognize and respect Russia’s status as a great world power.²³

22 *Russian National Security Strategy*, op. cit., art. 30.

23 D. Trenin, *A five-year outlook for Russian foreign policy: demands, drivers, and influences*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Trenin_Russian_FP_TF_clean.pdf [2017-08-03]; M. Menkiszak, ‘Najlepszy nieprzyjaciel Rosji. Rosyjska polityka

The interests served and protected by NATO's deterrence and defense posture were articulated in the Warsaw Summit Communiqué issued by the heads of state and government of the 28 member states attending the Warsaw Summit in July 2016.²⁴ It clearly states that: "The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty". NATO policy has basically remained unchanged since its founding in 1949—the main aim is to deter any form of attack or aggression on any of its member states. This is the vital collective interest safeguarded by the Alliance's deterrence. A wider, important but not vital, interest is to maintain the norms and main features of the regional order developed in the Euro-Atlantic area in the post-Cold War period, characterized in Alliance documents as a vision of "Europe whole, free and at peace." NATO leaders remarked in their communiqué that: "Russia's recent activities and policies have reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability, and changed the security environment. [...] and challenged the fundamental principles of the global and Euro-Atlantic security architecture."²⁵ Thus, we can see that NATO's deterrence policy aims to, 1) preclude any form of armed aggression against member states (vital), and 2) dissuade Russia from further actions that could destabilize the post-Cold War order in Europe, which is hugely favorable to the Alliance (important).

When we juxtapose these aims, it can be remarked that both sides exhibit opposite attitudes to the status quo in the ECE. NATO is the status quo power, determined to protect the current order from Russian encroachment. For Russia (as seen in the Ukraine conflict), the post-Cold War status quo is deeply unsatisfactory. Using prospect theory, it can be argued that NATO is operating in the gains frame while Russia is operating in the losses frame. That would explain NATO's reluctance to take actions that could be viewed as too provocative by

wobec USA w epoce Putina' [Russia's best opponent. Russian policy towards USA in Putin's era], *Punkt Widzenia* [View Point], No. 62, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich [Center for Eastern Studies], 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/punkt-widzenia/2017-02-15/najlepszy-nieprzyjaciel-rojsji-rosyjska-polityka-wobec-usa-w> [2017-08-03].

24 *Warsaw Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016*, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm, art. 6, [2017-06-04].

25 *Warsaw Summit Communiqué*, op. cit., art. 9.

Russia, as it has much to lose if the current order disintegrates into conflict. At the same time, the Russian leaders believe that the perpetuation of the status quo will only weaken their position. Thus, they are ready and willing to act more aggressively, disrupting the current order.

When looking at Russia's and NATO's deterrence aims, the ECE region is crucial to both sides. For Russia, it is part of its "near abroad" and is the most vulnerable to a dangerous "penetration" from the West (of both a material strategic kind and an ideational kind). The Kremlin's intervention in Ukraine clearly shows that it treats this area as prone to an infringement of Russia's interests. For NATO, the area is the part of Alliance territory most vulnerable to becoming an object of an attack or infringement by a third party—a strong state actor like Russia. The entire new deterrence posture that reinvigorated NATO's mission and purpose is about this area. So, this is the geographic area where Russia's and NATO's interests are most at odds and where the focus of their respective deterrence policies lie.

Having identified the aims served by NATO's and Russia's deterrence policies, we can now turn our attention to the actual deterrence strategies adopted to further them. Russia has apparently adopted the concept of "strategic deterrence" (*strategicheskoesderzhivanie*), which has been aptly described and analyzed by Kristin Ven Bruusgaard.²⁶ It has been defined in official Russian sources as:

"A coordinated system of military and non-military (political, diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological, scientific–technical and others) measures taken consecutively or simultaneously [...] with the goal of deterring military action entailing damage of a strategic character [...] Strategic deterrence is directed at the stabilization of the military–political situation [...] in order to influence an adversary within a predetermined framework, or for the de-escalation of military conflict [...] The objects to be influenced through strategic deterrence may be the military–political leadership and the population of the potential adversary state (or coalition of states) [...] Strategic-deterrent measures are carried out continuously, both in peacetime and in wartime."²⁷

26 K. Ven Bruusgaard, 'Russian Strategic Deterrence', *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2016.

27 *Military-Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Russian Ministry of Defense*, <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=14206@morfDictionary>; cited after: K. Ven Bruusgaard, op. cit., pp. 10–11.

As indicated in the quote above, this strategy envisions usage of a varied toolkit of nuclear, conventional and non-military instruments to deter adversaries. These components operate simultaneously and reinforce one another. Other key characteristics of this approach are its pro-activity and continuous employment. Strategic deterrence is meant to avoid a passive (defensive) posture in anticipation of hostile foreign action. It is rather a strategy of actively shaping the strategic environment through active use of different measures (non-military-political, economic, informational or demonstrations of military might and readiness). Contrary to most conventional Western approaches, it is to be applied throughout all stages of a political-military crisis. Here, deterrence does not stop with the outbreak of war, it continues so as to control escalation and ensure the cessation of hostilities on conditions favorable to Russia.²⁸ This relates to another distinctive feature—the blending of the deterrence-coercion dynamic. In its proactive approach, strategic deterrence can easily morph into coercing the opposite side into taking actions favorable to Russian interests.²⁹ To sum up, strategic deterrence can be viewed as a type of deterrence by denial, as it aims to dissuade opponents from infringing on Russia's core interests through the threat of swift and disruptive actions, able to thwart any enemy offensive (military or otherwise).

Such a strategy carries several advantages to the Russian side. It allows for synergetic use of all available power tools, creating added-value through leveraging nuclear, conventional and non-military means. This is especially valuable for a country with declining overall national power, like the Russian Federation. While it may be weaker vis-a-vis its opponents in every single aforementioned category, separately it can still gain the upper hand by combining them into one package. In the contemporary context, the employment of non-military tools seems to offer a lot of promise and attracts significant attention. This is naturally conditioned by the successful application of energy blackmail and information campaigns by Russia in the last two decades. Another advantage of strategic deterrence is its ability to calibrate actions and tools to fit the balance of one's strengths and

28 K. Ven Bruusgaard, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

the opponents' weaknesses. Alongside these significant strengths, the concept has some strategic drawbacks. On the one hand, its long-term application requires significant investment in a wide array of capabilities. The question of whether the Russian economy will be able to provide the financial resources needed for such a program remains wide open. But an even more important drawback is the built-in opacity in the signaling. As pointed out by Ven Bruusgaard, an active deterrence/coercion campaign can easily be viewed by the other side as aggressive.³⁰ Trying to deter an opponent by actively destabilizing its strategic position and environment can be viewed as just a step away from open aggression. This carries a great risk of strategic miscalculation and deterrence failure, since the opponent might feel pushed or attacked and strike back in return. We might have seen just this kind of dynamic at play in the Ukraine crisis when active Russian actions aimed at stemming perceived Western expansionism motivated NATO to adopt measures deemed by Russia as unacceptable (e.g., strengthening the Alliance's military presence on its Eastern Flank).

In response to Russia's aggressive actions in the context of the Ukraine crisis, NATO has adopted a set of measures that collectively can be called the Allied Reassurance and Deterrence Posture. Its core elements are the rotational deployment of Allied land, air and naval troops in Eastern European member states. This is accompanied by the significant intensification of Allied exercises in the area. The NATO Wales Summit of 2014 led to the enhancement of the Alliance's Response Force and the creation of a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force. This has been expanded further with Enhanced Forward Presence in the form of four multinational battalion battlegroups deployed to the Baltic states and Poland (as decided during the Warsaw Summit in 2016).³¹ It can be argued that these measures carry mostly political weight rather than strictly military. For good reason, "reassurance" is mentioned before "deterrence." This new posture is meant to reassure the Eastern European Allies that NATO is willing and capable of protecting them in the face of growing regional tensions. The

30 Ibid., pp. 20-21.

31 J. Ringsmose, S. Rynning, 'Now for the Hard Part: NATO's Strategic Adaptation to Russia', *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 3, 2017, pp. 130-132.

political symbolism of the first significant and long-term deployment of Western NATO troops to the east is enormous. After all, this went against a very strong and long-held sentiment of risk aversion when it came to relations with Russia displayed by many Western European Allies. The strategy is to deter Russia from moving aggressively against NATO members through a combination of limited military deployments, economic coercion (in the form of economic sanctions), and nascent counter-hybrid capabilities (aimed at countering non-military measures employed by Moscow, such as disinformation campaigns). This amounts to a type of deterrence-by-punishment strategy. NATO forces deployed on the Eastern Flank are nowhere near able to effectively counter a serious Russian military attack.³² The Allied units are relatively small, and moreover, dispersed across a large area. They are clearly meant as a trip-wire force, which is where their deterrence value lies. If Russia would attack any NATO member where Allied forces are deployed, it would immediately find itself at war with other Allies, as their troops would immediately be engaged in the fighting. The calculus seems to be that even if Russia would be able to defeat the first line of Allied defense and capture some territory (as seems very likely), it will nevertheless face severe punishment in the form of the complete military and economic might of NATO turned against it.³³

This approach offers several advantages. First, it is a clear signaling mechanism to Russia that NATO will defend Allied territory. It also enhances stability in the region because it is relatively non-provocative. The Allied forces deployed on the Eastern Flank cannot possibly pose any real threat to Russia. The posture is clearly defensive. The Allied reassurance and deterrence posture plays an important role in reinvigorating NATO's conventional defense posture, which has been neglected in the post-Cold War period in favor of expeditionary operations. At the same time, the current posture does it in a politically acceptable and fiscally affordable way because the real force deploy-

32 D. A. Shlapak, M.W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, RAND Corporation 2016, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf [2017-06-04].

33 J. Smith, J. Hendrix, *Assured Resolve Testing Possible Challenges to Baltic Security*, Center for A New American Security, 2016, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/assured-resolve-testing-possible-challenges-to-baltic-security> [2017-06-04].

ments are relatively small. Thanks to that, both the political will of the most reluctant members and limited financial resources are not unduly strained. On the other hand, the current NATO deterrence strategy exhibits a number of weaknesses. Contrary to the Russian approach, NATO's actions are reactive in nature. From the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, the Alliance was clearly on the defensive, reacting to the Russian provocations rather than actively shaping the security environment. This has a lot to do with the political disunity among the Allies, which translates into an acutely perceived lack of a clear overall strategy vis-a-vis Russia.³⁴ This led to deficiencies in the military posture underpinning the deterrence strategy. The facts are that NATO now exhibits (possibly short-term) military weakness compared with Russia on the Eastern Flank. This is because of years of cuts in European defense budgets, the duration of the orientation of forces towards expeditionary missions and asymmetric conflicts, and political reluctance to provoke Russia. As a consequence, the military deployments are of a signaling nature rather than significant deterrence by denial. Moreover, the entire enterprise is highly reliant on US inputs. That makes it even more tenuous due to the sheer unpredictability of President Donald Trump's foreign and security policy.

The Russian strategic deterrence strategy is clearly making ECE countries feel unsafe. They are very vulnerable to Russian threats and actions on all levels: nuclear, conventional and non-military (for example, energy issues). For them, it is not just deterrence but vital. The NATO deterrence posture is almost single-handedly ECE-focused and meant to reassure the region's members. However, its tenuous character still makes these countries uneasy.

3. Assessing the NATO-Russia Balance of Deterrence
Comparing the aims, strategies and postures underpinning the mutual deterrence policies of NATO and Russia, several conclusions stand out (summarized in Tab. 1). First, there is a certain asymmetry in clarity of deterrence aims. NATO's position is unambiguous—its purpose is to deter an overt attack on Allied territory. In Russia's case,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the situation is not that simple. If Russian deterrence policy is aimed at fending off threats to regime survival and maintenance of a sphere of influence, it is much less clear what actions would constitute the crossing of Russian “red lines.” Different actions can be (rightly or wrongly) construed as infringements on crucial Russian national interests. Such a lack of clarity can be destabilizing in a crisis. When comparing the balance of power between the two actors, we need to distinguish between the long-term trajectory of overall national power and the short-term relation of military strength. Many comparative studies of national power show clearly that Russia is a declining power.³⁵ Its demographic and economic potential is in a downward trajectory, which in time will have an impact on its military capabilities. In the short term, however, Russia enjoys local military superiority vis-a-vis NATO in Eastern Europe because Allied forces in the area have been significantly drawn down in the last few decades. This is evident when looking at data compiled by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) comparing the force postures of Russia and the five leading NATO states (France, Germany, Italy, UK and US).³⁶ In 2007-2016, all five Allied states in question decreased their defense expenditures while Russia almost doubled its own.³⁷ Moreover, most of the NATO armed forces have trained for and fought asymmetric conflicts in out-of-area operations. Force structures and equipment have been structured accordingly, leading to significant shortfalls in capabilities useful for large-scale combat with a symmetrical opponent. At the same time, Russia has maintained a robust military machine ready for large-scale combat. This is quite evident if we consider that in 2016, the Russian military alone held almost 57% of the military equipment in the five CFE treaty categories (main battle tanks, artillery, armored combat vehicles, combat aircraft, attack helicopters).³⁸ As concluded by the authors of the aforementioned PISM study: “While Russia has

35 See for example: R. Wiśniewski, B. Hensarling, ‘Power in 2025: A Global Ranking’, *R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2015 or Ch.F. Doran, ‘Imperatives of European Security at Russia’s Critical point on its Power Cycle’, *Stosunki Międzynarodowe* [International Relations], Vol. 51, No. 2, 2015.

36 M. Terlikowski (ed.), ‘Trends in Force Posture in Europe’, *Strategic File*, No. 1 (85), 2017, PISM, https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=23258 [2017-08-03].

37 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

demonstrated consistency and commitment in shaping its force posture towards high-intensity conventional operations inside the OSCE area, the evolution of the other analyzed states' force posture was uneven and largely guided by an urgent need to balance fiscal pressure with investments required to effectively engage in crisis-management operations."³⁹

Looking at another variable in the deterrence equation, credibility, it also favors Russia for the time being. After the attack on Ukraine, hardly anybody doubts Russia's resolve to use force in defense of its crucial interests. On the NATO side, a significant political uncertainty hinges over the Allied commitment to the Eastern European members. Moscow is working hard to foster this uncertainty and increase it. This opens the way for another form of asymmetry impacting the third part of the deterrence equation—the perception of deterrence on the side of those who are supposed to be deterred. It seems NATO is treating the Russian threats seriously and takes care not to cross Russian red lines (for example, refusing Ukraine delivery of armaments). On the other side, the Russian stance is less clear. Although Moscow has refrained from directly infringing on Allied territory, it is willing to conduct provocative military maneuvers in close proximity.

It is also useful to take bargaining and escalation dominance into account. Both sides have positive incentives to offer to the other in exchange for observing boundaries of acceptable behavior. NATO countries, especially European ones, were significant investors in pre-sanctions Russia. Moscow could surely use some of this capital back, especially to counter its growing dependency on China. On the other hand, Moscow has made repeated overtures to Western countries regarding counterterrorism cooperation against the Islamic State (IS). The appeal of such an offer only grows with every IS-linked attack in the West. Russia has also demonstrated its willingness and ability to escalate vertically (nuclear threats), horizontally (intervention in Syria), and politically (possible interference in the US presidential election). NATO was clearly unwilling to respond in kind, remaining escalation-averse throughout this entire period of growing tensions with Russia.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Considering the situation as outlined above, it can be concluded that the Russia-NATO balance of deterrence is not in a state of effective mutual deterrence. At the time of writing (first half of 2017), Russia enjoys an advantage on all three levels in the deterrence equation (capability, resolve and belief). Moreover, it seems—although it is a tenuous conclusion—that Russia is in a position allowing for escalation dominance. This stems from its greater readiness to leverage nuclear threats, as well as horizontal and political escalation, into new spheres of conflict. At the same time, it is hard to argue that NATO's deterrence posture is failing. For the time being, Moscow is observing the Alliance's red lines around Allied territory. We must conclude then that the balance of deterrence between these two powers is currently positioned in between mutually effective deterrence and one-sided effectiveness.

Table 1: Comparison of Russia and NATO deterrence policies

	Russia	NATO
Deterrence aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Regime survival ■ Maintenance of sphere of influence ■ Great power status <p>Loss frame Revision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Protection of alliance territory ■ Maintenance of the current international order ("Europe whole, free and at peace") <p>Gains frame Status quo</p>
Deterrence strategy	Strategic deterrence (deterrence by denial)	Allied reassurance and deterrence posture (deterrence by punishment)
Capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strong military capability ■ Lower general national power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Shortfall of military capabilities ■ Higher general national power
Resolve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strong commitment ■ Demonstrated capability for vertical, horizontal and political escalation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Doubtful commitment ■ Escalation aversion
Perception	Solid perception	Significant problem of perception

Source: Author's work.

Conclusions

When trying to forecast the balance of overall national power, it must be stressed that it augurs well that NATO has the ability to match Russian deterrence in effectiveness and establish effective mutual deter-

rence. That, however, requires a significant investment of financial and political capital on the Allies' behalf. As pointed out earlier, the current NATO military deployments on the Eastern Flank are geared more towards signaling and tripwire functions than a credible war-fighting posture. To change this, significant adjustments to force posture, command structure and (last but not least) Allied strategy and planning need to be introduced.⁴⁰ If NATO was to achieve effective deterrence vis-a-vis Russia, it would have to either significantly strengthen the severity and credibility of the threat of punishment underpinning the current strategy or switch to a strategy of deterrence by denial. The second option would require a massive force build-up on the Eastern Flank, which would be deemed by Russia as even more provocative. The effectiveness of NATO's deterrence policy will crucially hang on two factors: political unity among the Allies and the US commitment. The first factor is self-evident in the context of collective defense and deterrence, maintaining the consensus among all members around the character and scale of the deterrence posture will be a demanding task. The other factor considers the gaping asymmetry of power at the heart of NATO. Even when the declines in European Allies' defense spending and capabilities are being stopped, it doesn't change the fact that NATO's entire military posture is highly dependent on the quality and quantity of forces only the US is able to provide. To summarize, if NATO stands together, it is able to establish effective mutual deterrence to Russia. An important caveat, however, is in place. As pointed out in some studies, stable mutual deterrence requires that both sides accept the status quo.⁴¹ We have already established that in the Russian case this is problematic. If Russian leaders perceive their position as weakened due to NATO's growing effectiveness, they might be inclined to adopt ever-more active (even provocative in the other side's eye) deterrence behavior. That could further destabilize the security environment of the ECE.

The Ukraine crisis offered a stark reminder that the security of the ECE is greatly conditioned by its biggest military power—Russia. The

40 J. Ringsmose, S. Rynning, op. cit.; M. Zapfe, 'Deterrence from the Ground Up: Understanding NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence', *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 147-160.

41 A. Lupovici, 'The Emerging Fourth Wave of Deterrence Theory—Toward a New Research Agenda', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2010, p. 714.

current state of the NATO-Russia balance of deterrence does not augur well for strategic stability in the region. Until a mutually effective deterrence is established, the ECE Allies will not feel safe. The problem is that the regional balance of power does not make the ECE countries independent actors in this game. They are trapped between the Russian threat and almost whole dependence on the US and their West European NATO allies' guarantees when it comes to countering the former. They are unlikely to be able to deter Russia on their own. Thus, the future of the region is not entirely in their hands. Of course, there are initiatives to make the region more independent. The Bucharest format of Eastern Flank allies' consultations⁴² or increases in defense spending are clear examples of this, but they will take time. As a consequence, ECE NATO members must deal with all the complexities of managing an asymmetric relationship with their more powerful Allies, especially with the US.⁴³

NATO and its deterrence posture is pretty much everything that stands in the way of the ECE being hegemonically dominated by Russia. Thus, the effectiveness of this posture is crucial for regional Allies to maintain their independent status. Since the balance is not stable, the ECE countries are vulnerable to Russian pressure. To some degree, the Western allies can afford to fail to deter Russia; the ECE cannot. On the other hand, this acute sense of insecurity is what led these countries to push for policies Moscow sees as infringements on its red lines—the Eastern Partnership and inviting Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO. This leads to another important question regarding the balance of deterrence between Russia and NATO. How much do both sides' policies fuel the security dilemma? It can be argued that the EU and NATO neighborhood policy towards the post-Soviet states fueled the Russian sense of insecurity. The moves adopted

42 This initiative has started with a summit of leaders of Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland and Romania held in Bucharest in November 2015 to demonstrate regional unity and support for NATO's adaptation to the Russia threat. *Szef BBN dla PAP: W Bukareszcie udało się wzmocnić jedność państw regionu* [Chief of BBN for PAP: In Bucharest we have successfully strengthened the unity of regional states], BBN [National Security Bureau of Republic of Poland], 5-11-2017, <https://www.bbn.gov.pl/pl/wydarzenia/7130.Szef-BBN-dla-PAP-W-Bukareszcie-udalo-sie-wzmocnic-jednosc-panstw-regionu.html> [2017-08-03].

43 R. Kupiecki, 'The Poland-United States security relations in the light of asymmetry theory', *Przegląd Strategiczny* [Strategic Review], No. 9, 2016, pp. 31-48.

by the Kremlin as part of its “strategic deterrence” then dramatically increased the Allied threat perceptions. This, in turn, motivated Enhanced Forward Presence, which Russia views as highly provocative. Although it would be a bold thesis to claim that the security dilemma is the only (or even the main) factor explaining the current deterioration of NATO-Russia relations, it must be considered when analyzing their deterrence balance.

Everything points to end of the ECE’s post-Cold War “strategic pause.” Although for now mutual deterrence is effective enough to minimize the probability of open conflict, the region is much more unstable due to the mismatch in the effectiveness of Russia’s and NATO’s deterrence postures.

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