The sources of Russia's fear of NATO

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The paper analyzes Russia's perception of NATO since the beginning of its eastern enlargement. Russia's reaction to the enlargement evolved from attempts to diffuse its potential damage through a limited cooperation to passive and then active policies of containment. The latter have resulted in a risky behavior with respect to the alliance and a concentration of Russian military on the Western border. Two factors can assist us in explaining Russia's evolving perception of NATO from a potential partner to a renewed military threat — the historical experience of viewing the alliance, and the West in general, as potentially threatening and the post-Cold war interaction with NATO that served to strengthen the historically developed perception. As of today, Russia has learned from its interaction with the alliance that NATO remains a principle threat to Russia's national security and that through the alliance's expansion the West seeks to exercise its cultural, economic, and political domination in Eurasia.

1. Introduction

Since NATO's decision to expand in 1994, Russia's relations with the alliance have gone through several cycles of stability and crisis. The first two crises were associated with NATO's air strikes against Serbia in 1999 and the Russia-Georgia conflict in August 2008, respectively. Each crisis was accompanied by a disruption of institutional and political communication between Russia and the Atlantic alliance. The third crisis developed following the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine and has been the worst in Russia-NATO relations. Unlike the previous ones, the third crisis resulted in revision of the alliance's military policy and perception of Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in the eastern Ukraine. The revision was initiated during the Wales summit in 2014 and was completed at the Warsaw summit in July 2016.[1] The Warsaw summit served to demonstrate the allies' unity in deterring the threat from Russia, agreed to deploy additional forces in Poland and the Baltic states, and recommended that all NATO members raise defense expenditure to the level of 2% of their GDP. Although the summit also stressed importance of a dialogue with the Kremlin, the main actions and decisions by the alliance indicated a qualitative change in perception of Russia. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia was viewed as the main threat to the West's security.

This paper considers the Russian side in the progressively deteriorating relations with the Atlantic alliance. I argue that Russia's fear of NATO resulted from a historically enduring perception of the alliance as a key security threat and from the alliance's actions that played into reviving such perception in Moscow following the end of the Cold War. The alliance's

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leaders consistently refused to recognize Russia as a power with important stakes in European security. The Kremlin's protests over NATO's expansion were ignored, while alliance continued to include new members and build new military infrastructure on territories bordering Russia. Along with the United States' global regime change strategy and growing criticism of Russia's human rights record, these developments gradually built the perception of NATO as serving hegemonic ambitions of the Western civilization in general and the United States in particular. Civilization is defined as a system of politically and culturally distinct values, or beliefs about appropriate organization of human institutions and foreign policy. Initially Russia viewed NATO's expansion as a mistake driven by the organization's inertia, but the more recent perception by the Kremlin betrays fear of the alliance as an offensive military organization employed to meet the larger objective to dismantle Russia's political regime and system of values (Patrushev, 2015b). Western civilization is centered on competitive political system and individualism, whereas Russia and other non-Western societies continue to rely on a highly concentrated authority of the executive (Hale, 2014; Tsygankov, 2015). Today, institutions responsible for defending Russia from external threats are also charged with the task of political security and prevention of destabilization through a "colored revolution".[2]

The constructivist theory of international relations assists us in understanding Russia's perception by pointing to the significance of "the other" in the process of forming self-identity (Doty, 1996; Neumann, 1999, 2017; Hopf, 2002; Pouliot, 2010). For Russia and the West the Cold War proved too recent to transform their perception of each other as potential threats. Constructivism views perception as a social, rather than objective phenomenon. Perception is defined by historically enduring beliefs and repetitive social practices and is rooted in the self-other interactions. Allies for only the brief period of the Second World War and enemies for almost half a century, the two sides did not overcome some of the old perceptions and stereotypes. The United States continued to mistrust Russia and insisted on reshaping the world according to the American image by promoting neo-liberal institutions and NATO-centered security policies in Europe. Russia too displayed mistrust to the West, acting on the old phobias over the West's intentions and seeking to contain the United States' "global hegemony." As early as in 1997 the country's National Security Concept recommended that Russia maintains equal distance in relations to the "global European and Asian economic and political actors" and presented a program for the integration of CIS efforts in the security area (Shakleina, 2002, 51–90).

Other theories of international relations are helpful yet insufficient to explain Russia's perception of NATO as the main threat. Realists may find it puzzling that in the 1990s the Kremlin did not see a serious military threat coming from the alliance viewing it largely as a political organization with an insufficiently reformed perspective on the post-Cold War challenges. In addition, even after NATO has officially announced its view of Russia as the main threat and the decision to build up its military capabilities in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, the alliance could hardly be qualified as the most important threat to Russia's security. The four proposed NATO's battalions on rotation basis did not present a serious challenge, and military analysts recognized that the alliance was not an effective deterrent should the Kremlin choose to attack the identified East European states.[3]

Liberals or those stressing Putin's regime insecurities are correct that NATO is a convenient threat to exploit for domestic stability purposes, yet liberals misunderstand the regime's intentions and the timing of nationalist domestic mobilization. The contemporary level of Russia's military preparedness and the willingness of the Kremlin to take a high risk, as demonstrated by dangerous incidents involving Russian and NATO's military planes and sea vessels (Ian Kearns and Raynova, 2016), indicate that Moscow views the alliance as a serious security threat. In addition, the argument about the Kremlin's diversionary tactics applies only to post-2012 developments as related to Putin's entrenched politics of nationalism, anti-Americanism, and information war against the West.

The paper is organized in the following way. The next section explains the framework for understanding the formation of Russia's fear of NATO stressing the role of history and the alliance's activities contributing to the three crises in the bilateral relations. The following section describes the crises using the proposed framework, and the final substantive part concentrates on recent developments following the Euromaidan Ukrainian revolution and leading up to the Warsaw summit of the alliance in July 2016. The conclusion summarizes the analysis and lessons learned by Russia from its experience with NATO.

1.1. The social construction of the NATO threat

The notion of threat plays a central role in international relations theory; yet different schools approach threat differently. While liberals tend to stress subjective and political nature of threat and foreign policy formation, depending on preferences of leaders and regime's internal characteristics (Doyle, 2016), realists define threat "objectively", in terms of calculations of military capabilities, offense-defense balance, alliances, and international system's structure.[4] Constructivists view threats in

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[2] Both Russia's Security Council and Ministry of Defense are now involved in fighting such a threat (Nagornykh and Safronov 2015).

[3] As Jorge Benitez of the Atlantic Council wrote, "Four battalions (perhaps 4000 men) do not come close to deterring the approximately 250,000 troops Russia has in its Western Military District (WMD) bordering NATO. In fact, four NATO battalions are not even a proportional response to the 3 new divisions (roughly 30,000 troops) Russia announced in January that it is creating in the WMD. At best, the deployment of four NATO battalions is an incremental step to strengthen deterrence that falls short of changing the calculus in Moscow. At worst, they are evidence to Putin that NATO is so weak and divided, the allies can only muster consensus on tepid action, such as the deployment of battalion-sized speed bumps for his Spetsnaz as they trample over Article 5" (Cited in Bershidsky, 2016).

[4] The modified realist perspective stresses the role of various intervening variables in state interactions, including individual perceptions and domestic structures (Taliaferro et al., 2016).