

How to defend Europe from Russia

By Gustav Gressel

Today's Russia is not the Soviet Union, but it still wants to ensure its pre-eminence in the post-Soviet space, to break down the EU/NATO-centric European order, and to be prepared for a new global conflict. To achieve these goals, it is prepared to use military force where necessary. In response, Europe must prepare itself to meet the conventional and unconventional threat from Russia.

Policymakers who claim that NATO would be in no danger in a conflict with Russia miss some important facts. First, when NATO forces are considered as a whole, the assessment usually includes the United States. The US is and will continue to be strong enough to counterbalance Russia militarily in the foreseeable future. But, while Russian military planners have no illusions about their ability to defeat the US, they calculate that they would have some chance in a war that the US is unwilling or unable to join.

Even if Russia's military strength is compared only to European NATO members, a first look might be misleading. Budgets are of little use in comparing military forces. Europe finances a huge bureaucratic overhead in various defence ministries, which Russia does not. And bureaucrats – even those wearing uniforms – are no fighting force. Even comparing troops may be problematic, since 50 percent of NATO's European land forces are actually Turkish. For better or worse, Turkey is for the time being concerned with its own neighbourhood.

There is a rough numerical parity in land forces, while Europe has some numerical superiority in air forces. Though the readiness of the Russian armed forces remains below its goal, and much of their equipment is old, the same is true for Europe. Since the end of the Cold War, expeditionary warfare has been the norm for much of Europe. As a result, only a few formations were kept combat ready, while others were put into standby mode. Most heavy equipment and fighter planes date from the Cold War, and need to be replaced. In some capabilities, such as air defence, combat engineering, electronic warfare, and artillery, most

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European armies have seriously diminished their capabilities. Hence, the Russian assessment – that Europe would be beatable if stripped of US support – is backed by some evidence.

Russian adventurism may be further increased by the fact that NATO has to defend a larger territory with fewer troops than it did during the Cold War. If Russia took the initiative, it could dictate time and space to its liking. It would face little military resistance, especially in limited incursions on the periphery.

However, both the capability gaps and Russia's operative advantages could be diminished if Europe were serious about it. With the exception of the nuclear dimension, Europe could become self-sufficient in defence by pursuing the following recommendations.

1. Support the post-Soviet space: The post-Soviet space is the most likely theatre of Russia's next military operations. The more capable and the more self-reliant these states are, the less likely it is that Russia will escalate a crisis to total war. In Donbas, Russia escalates when Ukraine is weak and de-escalates when Ukraine inflicts casualties. This is an argument for supporting the post-Soviet states that have aligned with Europe. This support should involve weapons transfers, training, and reform of the defence and security sectors. The border guard, police, and judiciary should be strengthened, as they would be the first responders in any "hybrid" war, and the initial narrative will be key in Russian attempts to legitimise its aggression.
2. Build up a flexible presence in Eastern Europe: A new deterrence will differ considerably from that used during the Cold War, as there are fewer forces available, more territory to be defended, and different likely scenarios. In a hybrid scenario, NATO would need to get boots on the ground and project firepower across large distances fast. Establishing multinational air-power assets and air-mobile troops in Eastern Europe, accompanied by assault helicopters, would be a good rapid-reaction tool.
3. Exercise defence and roll-back operations: The readiness benchmark for deploying Russian combat troops in the "near abroad" calls for one corps-sized operation within a week, expanding to a three

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corps-sized mission within a month. NATO will prevail in conventional deterrence if it can deploy sufficient heavy forces within a few days to defend a given territory before the one-month timeframe kicks in. Manoeuvres in Eastern Europe to this end would give a clear signal to Russia that the risk is not worth taking. Some will claim that this would provoke further Russian militarisation, but, unlike the Soviet Union, Russia has very limited economic, financial, and manpower resources compared to a united Europe. Only if Europe is weak can Russia pretend to be strong.

4. Get serious about nuclear deterrence: On paper, NATO still sees nuclear weapons as the core of its security, but this is less clear in practice. Strategic deterrence between the US and Russia works well, but not every use of non-strategic nuclear weapons by Russia would be immediately answered by an all-out US nuclear strike. NATO adopted "flexible response" (instead of "massive retaliation") in 1967. However, the means for such flexible response are now lacking, and the American B-61 is outdated. Europe could play a role here, by offering air-launched non-GPS-reliant cruise missiles for the US warhead. More importantly, practising nuclear counter-strikes would signal to Russia that escalation would not be a risk-free tool of blackmail.
5. Rebuild conventional capabilities: Europe would not need huge re-armament to counter Russia: the troops that exist on paper are enough, if they were readily deployable. But European armies need to reverse decisions taken in previous years to abandon (or radically reduce) military capabilities that are essential for conventional mechanised warfare. It needs to develop next generations of various systems, and the EU would be the ideal facilitator to ensure that Europe creates competitive solutions to these challenges, instead of a series of parallel small-scale programmes.

The main aim of these measures is to deny Russia easy opportunities to gain from any circumstance that occupies the US elsewhere. Even though Russia would likely lose any world war it started, the dramatic losses of the last world war and the existence of nuclear weapons remind us that it is better to stay on the safe side of deterrence.

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