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Addressing the Threat from Russia Must Be Front and Center at the 2018 NATO Summit

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The 2018 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Summit will take place on July 11 and 12 in Brussels. Expectations for the summit are for a continued focus on implementing the decisions made at the 2016 Warsaw summit, while seeking further progress on cybersecurity, defense spending, and military readiness. The United States should work to ensure that the threat from Russia is a specific focus of the Brussels Summit and the top agenda item for leaders assembled. While the Alliance faces challenges emanating from an unstable Mediterranean basin, Russia continues to represent the only existential threat to member states; NATO must send a strong signal that it is strengthening deterrence measures explicitly in response to Russia. The U.S. should also address the security threat to European allies emanating from the planned Nord Stream II gas pipeline, a political project that would greatly undermine European security if allowed to be completed.

Back to Basics

NATO was founded in 1949 with the mission of protecting the territorial integrity of its members and—if required—defeating the Soviet Union. While NATO's members are no longer worried about the spread of communism, many current NATO members are certainly worried about protecting their territory from Russian expansion.

The United States needs a NATO that can deter aggression and defend the territorial integrity of its members. Everything else that NATO might do is secondary to the No. 1 mission of territorial defense.

In the 21st century, NATO needs to return to basics, with territorial defense as its primary goal. NATO does not have to be everywhere in the world doing everything all the time, and it should shy away from out-of-area military interventions. Rather, NATO must be capable of defending its members' territorial integrity.

Threat from Russia

Russia poses a conventional, nonconventional, and nuclear threat to NATO, in particular the Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. Estonia's Foreign Intelligence Service's 2018 report states clearly, "The only existential threat to the sovereignty of Estonia and other Baltic Sea states emanates from Russia."[1] Russia's use of nonconventional means to apply pressure to, and sow discord among, NATO members is a threat not only to those member states nearest Russia but the entire Alliance. Russia seeks to create new fissures within NATO and exploiting preexisting points of stress between allies in an effort to break the alliance, therefore it is essential that the U.S. and its European NATO allies display a united front in response to Russia aggression.

Russia has demonstrated an ability and willingness to change borders by force: in 2008, invading Georgia and occupying 20 percent of its territory; likewise in 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine, ille-

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gally annexed Crimea, and instigated and supported a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine, backed by Russian funding, troops, and weaponry. Today, around 3,000 Russian troops are operating in eastern Ukraine,[2] and Russia continues to fortify Crimea, deploying 28,000 troops alongside long-range cruise missiles and air defense systems.[3] The war in Ukraine has already cost 11,000 lives and displaced 1.7 million people.[4]

Despite cuts in 2017, Russian defense spending remains high, and the impact of more than a decade of ongoing military modernization can be seen across Russia's military, including in Syria and Ukraine. In January 2018, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford noted, "There is not a single aspect of the Russian armed forces that has not received some degree of modernization over the past decade."[5] Russia maintains the world's largest nuclear arsenal and has threatened Europe with nuclear attack in the past.[6] Under Russian military doctrine, the use of nuclear weapons in conventional local and regional wars is seen as de-escalatory because it would cause an enemy to concede defeat. In May 2017, for example, a Russian parliamentarian threatened that nuclear weapons might be used if the U.S. or NATO were to move to retake Crimea or defend eastern Ukraine.[7]

Russia's National Security Strategy describes NATO as a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation, and clearly states that Russia will use every means at its disposal to achieve its strategic goals.[8] For instance, Russian cyber attacks have targeted energy infrastructure including in Germany, Ukraine, and the United States.[9] Russian cyber attacks have also frequently targeted Western elections and sought to undermine public faith in democratic institutions. In addition to cyber attacks, Russia has employed diplomatic leverage, energy coercion, espionage, influence operations, political assassinations, propaganda, provocative flights, and snap exercises to undermine the U.S. and NATO, and aggressively advance its interests.

Russia as the Main Priority

From the Arctic to the Levant, Russia remains an aggressive and capable threat to NATO and the interests of its members. While the likelihood of a conventional attack against a NATO member state remains low, it cannot be entirely discounted. In the interim, Russia is likely to use a host of tools in unison to pressure the Alliance, expose cracks between member states, and undermine NATO deterrence measures. At the NATO Summit, the U.S. should:

- **Ensure that deterring Russian aggression is an explicit—and the top—agenda item.** Russia represents a real and potentially existential threat to NATO members in Eastern and Central Europe, and a significant threat and challenge to the rest of the Alliance. As NATO continues its transition back to collective defense, now is not the time to be coy about why defense is necessary. Allies should talk openly and frankly about the threat

1. Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia 2018*, p. 18, https://www.valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport-2018-ENG-web.pdf (accessed June 18, 2018).
2. Nolan Peterson, "NATO Braces for Putin's Next Military Move in Eastern Europe," The Daily Signal, March 26, 2018, https://www.dailysignal.com/2018/03/26/nato-braces-putins-next-military-move-eastern-europe/.
3. Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, "Assessing Threats to U.S. Vital Interests: Europe," (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2018), https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-threats-us-vital-interests/europe.
4. Nolan Peterson, "NATO Braces for Putin's Next Military Move in Eastern Europe," The Daily Signal, March 26, 2018, https://www.dailysignal.com/2018/03/26/nato-braces-putins-next-military-move-eastern-europe/.
5. Damien Sharkov, "Russia's Military Expansion Makes it Greatest Threat to Europe and NATO Must Defend it, Says U.S. General," *Newsweek*, January 16, 2018, http://www.newsweek.com/russias-military-expansion-makes-it-greatest-threat-europe-nato-782114 (accessed June 15, 2018).
6. Gerard O'Dwyer, "Denmark Progresses in NATO Ballistic Missile Defense Role," *Defense News*, April 22, 2016, http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/air-space/strike/2016/04/22/denmark-progresses-nato-ballistic-missile-defense-role/83391868/ (accessed June 6, 2017).
7. Tom O'Connor, "Russia Conflict with NATO and U.S. Would Immediately Result in Nuclear War, Russian Lawmaker Warns," *Newsweek*, May 30, 2017, http://www.newsweek.com/russia-politician-nuclear-weapons-us-nato-crimea-617613 (accessed July 11, 2017).
8. Wood, ed., *2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, "Assessing Threats to U.S. Vital Interests: Europe."
9. "German Intelligence Sees Russia Behind Hack of Energy Firms: Media Report," Reuters, https://mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN1JG2X2?__twitter_impression=true (accessed June 22, 2018).

from Russia, and which steps are being taken to deter Russia, and bolster defensive capabilities.

- **Call for the development of a new Strategic Concept.** A NATO Strategic Concept is an official document that outlines the geopolitical and security challenges facing the Alliance, and the strategy that should be adapted to deal with these challenges. The last NATO Strategic Concept was published in 2010, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Arab Spring, the migrant crisis, and Russia's intervention in Syria. It is time for the Alliance to update the Strategic Concept before the July summit.

- **Push back against Nord Stream II.** The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Rather, it is a political project to greatly increase European dependence on Russian gas, magnify Russia's ability to use its European energy dominance as political trump card, and specifically undermine U.S. allies in Eastern and Central Europe. The U.S. should use the NATO summit, a key forum with European allies, to specifically address Nord Stream II, expressing U.S. opposition, and linking the pipeline to NATO collective defense, which it would greatly undermine. A U.S. focus on stopping Nord Stream II at the summit may give other member states concerned about the project political cover to express their own concerns and opposition.

Conclusion

The success of the NATO Summit may be largely determined before any leaders arrive on the ground in Brussels. The U.S. should work with like-minded allies to ensure that Russia, specifically the threat it represents to member states in Eastern Europe, is the top agenda item in July. With this clear understanding, the Alliance can move toward discussing the specific measures it is taking and implementing to deter the threat from Russia. The destabilizing aftershocks rippling through Europe from the ongoing migrant crisis deserve Alliance attention. However, the U.S. should not allow these concerns to distract NATO from robustly addressing the Russian threat and siphoning valuable resources from NATO's chief mission of collective defense.

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