



CDEFAI

CANADIAN DEFENCE & FOREIGN AFFAIRS INSTITUTE

NATO: Countering Strategic *Maskirovka*

by Julian Lindley-French
May, 2015



POLICY PAPER

NATO: Countering Strategic *Maskirovka*

by Julian Lindley-French

Senior Fellow, Institute of Statecraft, London
Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow, National Defense University, Washington D.C.
CDFAI Fellow

May 2015



Prepared for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute
1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8
www.cdfai.org

©2015 Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute
ISBN: 978-1-927573-31-0

► Executive Summary

What must NATO do to counter President Putin? *Maskirovka* is the traditional Russian use of military deception and Russia's seizure of Ukraine-Crimea and incursion into eastern Ukraine is just the beginning of a new multi-dimensional Russian challenge to NATO and the West. Moscow has established a new level of ambition – strategic *Maskirovka* – by which disinformation is applied against all levels of NATO's command chain and wider public opinion to keep the West politically and militarily off-balance.

First, NATO's strongest military powers must demonstrate the will and the capacity to meet the Russian challenge. Second, NATO, an alliance of democracies, must re-establish itself at the core of a world-wide web of secure, mutually-reinforcing democracies anchored on the United States. Third, defence expenditure of all the NATO allies must move towards 2% GDP and quickly. Fourth, the Alliance must mean what it says. Strategic unity of effort and purpose is key to deterring Russia. Fifth, Europeans must take the lead in efforts to convince President Putin that Russia has nothing to gain from such an aggressive strategy.

President Putin is an opportunist. He believes that the West is decadent and declining and that his use of strategic *Maskirovka* can keep the Allies sufficiently divided and politically off-balance to enable him to achieve his *primary* strategic objective: the creation of a new Russian-centric sphere of influence around Russia's borders and the ending of 'frozen conflicts' in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in Russia's favour. Putin also believes that whatever weapons-systems NATO has at its disposal, Europeans are so weak and divided that little or no military action will ever be taken against him. Putin may be right and his gamble (for that is what it is) could pay off if the Alliance does not stand firm and act together.





“We simply as a world cannot afford the risk of Europe going back to being a continent where people seize territory, where they make claims on other neighbouring countries, where the bigger military powers are prepared to invade their neighbours or carve off pieces.”

Prime Minister Steven Harper, 25 March, 2014¹

Maskirovka is the traditional Russian use of military deception. Russia’s seizure of Ukraine-Crimea and incursion into eastern Ukraine is just the beginning of a new multi-dimensional Russian challenge to NATO. Moscow has established a new level of ambition – strategic *Maskirovka* – by which disinformation is applied against all levels of NATO’s command chain and wider public opinion to keep the West politically and militarily off-balance. Indeed, whilst Eastern Europe is the focus of the conflict, Moscow is clearly attempting to force the NATO Allies to consider simultaneous challenges on several fronts, specifically the High North, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Indeed, in spite of the understandable focus on Ukraine’s tragedy, President Putin’s challenge is truly grand strategic and spans four dimensions: conventional warfare, hybrid or non-linear warfare, nuclear strategy, and geographical reach. Therefore, Russia’s challenge is a test of Alliance strategic will and political cohesion. President Putin must not be under-estimated.

RUSSIA’S ‘WAR’ AIMS

“In the past 20 years, our [Russia’s] partners have been trying to convince Russia of their good intentions, their readiness to jointly develop strategic co-operation. However, at the same time they kept expanding NATO, extending the area under their military and political control ever closer to our borders.”²

Given the cost of Putin’s new strategy to the Russian state and its people, the stakes for the Kremlin are both very high and very risky. Since the 2012 start of his third term, President Putin has abandoned partnership with the West and has instead embarked on an increasingly aggressive and anti-Western foreign and security policy. The strategy seems to reflect Putin’s own world-view, in particular his belief that the West has repeatedly rejected Russian calls for a new European security architecture that if agreed would see the demise of NATO and the effective exclusion of the North American allies from the European Continent.

The aims of this strategy would appear to be manifold, but essentially involve the re-establishment of Russia as a great military power, rejection of the idea of security community, the reinstatement of classical balance of power politics in and around Europe, and the creation of a ‘buffer zone’ around Russia’s borders. Moscow seeks to achieve its aims either through co-operation via an EU-mirroring Eurasian Union, or through coercion and destabilisation by forcing reluctant states into a new Russian sphere of influence. An expansionist NATO is presented by the Kremlin as the *casus belli* to justify Russian assertiveness. In the year that commemorates the seventieth anniversary of the end of what Russians call the Great Patriotic

¹ National Post, “Stephen Harper says Putin is Stuck in Cold War as Obama warns of Threat to World Order”, 26 March, 2014, www.news.nationalpost.com/2014/03/26/stephen-harper-says-putin-is-stuck-in-cold-war-as-obama-warns-of-threat-to-world-order/

² Speech by President Putin, “Conference of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives”, 1 July, 2014, eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/22586



War, Putin is also appealing to Russian nostalgia and patriotism to better consolidate the power of the Kremlin over all aspects of the Russian state and society.

The central pillar of Putin's strategy is the establishment of Russian force superiority at times of crisis, the timing and location of which Russia chooses. The strategy assumes massive reinvestment in Russia's armed forces and continued under-investment in European and Canadian forces, and the over-stretch of U.S. forces. Specifically, the emerging Russian future force must by 2020 be able to effectively encircle and detach the Baltic States from NATO and the EU, and prevent NATO reinforcement by simultaneous interventions elsewhere on NATO flanks. *The Economist* states, "According to IHS Jane's, a defence consultancy, by next year Russia's defence spending will have tripled in nominal terms since 2007, and it will be halfway through a ten year, 20 trillion rouble (\$300 billion) programme to modernise its weapons. New types of missiles, bombers and submarines are being readied for deployment over the next few years. Spending on defence and security is expected to climb by 30% this year and swallow more than a third of the federal budget."³ Moscow's main challenge is Russia itself. There are serious questions as to whether an ailing Russian economy can bear the cost of such a programme, and whether the Russian state beset by corruption and financial management can deliver it.

Putin is also seeking a new strategic partnership with China to keep the West off-balance. However, the Russo-China relationship remains complex and fractious and Russia's military investment is as much designed to deter China as impress her. Ideally, Putin would like China to be a powerful military ally in any future confrontation with NATO and by extension the U.S. Specifically, Putin seeks to complicate the strategic calculus of a United States already suffering from military over-stretch and by suggesting America's might be de-coupled from European defence enhance Russian influence, particularly in Eastern Europe.

THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO

The 2014 Wales Summit Declaration states, "NATO needs, now more than ever, modern, robust, and capable forces at high readiness, in the air, on land and at sea, in order to meet current and future challenges."⁴ For NATO Russia's abandonment of partnership marks the return to the kind of big defence for which the Alliance was created. However, implicit in Putin's challenge is a profound question for NATO; can the Alliance generate sufficient strategic unity of effort and purpose to both deter and contain Russia? Most NATO European members had assumed no major conflict in Europe for the foreseeable future. Consequently, since 2001 many have cut their defence budgets repeatedly, some as high as 30%. Indeed, between 2012 and 2014 thirteen of the world's top twenty defence-cutting nations were to be found in NATO Europe. Moreover, between 2014 and 2020 the U.S. plans to cut its defence budget to some \$450 billion, more than then entire defence expenditure of NATO Europe, which totals some \$240 billion.⁵

Equally, Russia's aggression, combined with the emergence of Islamic State south of the Mediterranean, has finally begun to challenge Europe's long-cherished belief that soft power is the key to influence in the twenty-first century.⁶ At the NATO Wales Summit the nations did at

³ See "What Russia Wants", *The Economist*, 14 February, 2014

⁴ Wales Summit Declaration, 5 September, 2014, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_112964.htm

⁵ Author's own research

⁶ Above figures author's own research



least agree to “reverse the trend of declining defence budgets, to make the most effective use of our funds and to further a more balanced sharing of costs and responsibilities.”⁷

However, it is not just the level of expenditure the NATO allies must consider, but the type and the balance to be struck between security and defence, and home-base protection and power projection. The threat Islamic State poses to Western societies through radicalisation means a new balance must be forged between protection of the home base against terrorism, subversion (and a possible combination of the two), power projection and the use and utility of force to prevent, deter, and if needs be, interdict.

NATO’S NEW DEFENCE

The Wales Summit Declaration states, “At our last summit in Chicago we set ourselves the ambitious goal of NATO Forces 2020: modern, tightly connected forces equipped, trained, exercised, and commanded so as to be able to meet NATO’s Level of Ambition and so that they can operate together and with partners in any environment.”⁸ Since the end of the Cold War, and in spite of its invocation on 12 September, 2001, the cornerstone Article 5 collective defence commitment of the Alliance has been somewhat parked. Instead, NATO became a crisis management mechanism with a focus on stabilisation, reconstruction and enlargement. Whilst Russia’s incursion into Ukraine has ended NATO’s strategic vacation and re-established the need for a sound and credible defence, the jury is still out as to whether sufficient will exists to counter Russian strategy.

The NATO Wales ‘plan’ is to provide strategic reassurance to allies in Eastern Europe via a new set of interlocking forces enshrined in a Readiness Action Plan and led by a so-called Spearhead Force. The force would act as a first-responder in the event of a Russian incursion into the Baltic States, as part of a forward deterrence posture reinforced by a layered defence that would stretch back to continental North America. In some ways the Wales Summit reinvented the old REFORGER concept of the 1980s whereby American and Canadian forces would reinforce the Alliance from over the strategic horizon in the event of an attack.

However, simply creating more acronyms with static or shrinking forces will not in and of itself reassure allies or deter Moscow. Putin would have noted that NATO Allies, many mired in the Eurozone debt crisis, only agreed to move towards fulfilling the 2% GDP NATO ‘guideline’ on defence expenditure “within a decade.”

What the Alliance needs in the face of the strategic *Maskirovka* is root-and-branch modernisation of collective defence reinforced by evident political solidarity. Moreover, the challenge Russia poses demands a new balance be struck between in and out-of area operations. This challenge in turn implies a radical new force concept incorporating more advanced, deployable forces, including Special Forces, and increased and improved defence against cyber and missile attack into a single offensive and defensive force paradigm.

⁷ “Wales Summit Declaration” Press Release, Issued by NATO 5 September, 2014. Article 4.

⁸ Wales Summit Declaration, 5 September, 2014, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_112964.htm



COUNTERING STRATEGIC *MASKIROVKA*

The Russian use of hybrid or non-linear warfare in Ukraine also suggests the blurring of the traditional NATO distinction between collective defence and collective security. *Maskirovka* is in fact war that is short of war, a purposeful strategy of deception that combines use of force with disinformation and destabilisation to create ambiguity in the minds of Alliance leaders about how best to respond.

Russia recently introduced nuclear weapons into its ambiguous messaging in an attempt to intimidate Western leaders and thus help create the political space Russian forces and their proxies are seeking to exploit in Ukraine, and possibly beyond. For example, in July the U.S. State Department accused Russia of breaching the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) by testing a new medium-range ground-launched cruise missile. Moreover, the stationing of mobile Topol-M missiles in such a way they can only be aimed at NATO Europe, allied to the complete breakdown of the Conventional Forces Europe framework, snap exercises in Kaliningrad and the major Zapad exercises in the Western Military Oblast, all add to the heady cocktail of intimidation and implied aggression that Russian strategy has now adopted. Furthermore, the December 2014 Russian Military Strategy implied a shift in nuclear doctrine to include the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia in the event of a major conventional attack. Russia's shift is not that surprising as it mirrors NATO's own first-use nuclear posture. However, the timing in the midst of the Ukraine crisis was clearly designed to ratchet up tensions between Western leaders over how best to counter Russian aggression.

Putin's use of strategic *Maskirovka* is not confined to Europe. Four Russian warships appeared off the northern coast of Australia during the November 2014 G8 meeting. It was as clear a signal as ever that Russia sees itself as a global military power, and that its forces may appear anywhere, anytime. For NATO the implications of such an aggressive and global use of force and diplomatic disinformation are profound. Indeed, if Russia now seeks to exert influence across the World, in theory at least, that means the U.S., Canada and other NATO allies will need to consider how best to monitor and counter Russian military activity in Europe, the High North and Asia-Pacific. That in turn will mean closer co-operation between NATO and NORAD, for example (and at the very least), because *Maskirovka* is by its very definition 'war' at the seams which seeks to exploit seams.

POLICY OPTIONS

"We continue to believe that a partnership between NATO and Russia based on respect for international law would be of strategic value. We continue to aspire to a cooperative, constructive relationship with Russia, including reciprocal confidence-building and transparency measures and increased mutual understanding of NATO's and Russia's non-strategic nuclear force postures in Europe, based on our common security concerns and interests, in a Europe where each country chooses its future."⁹

President Putin believes that the West is decadent and declining and that his use of strategic *Maskirovka* can keep the Allies sufficiently divided and politically off-balance to enable him to achieve his *primary* strategic objective: the creation of a new Russian-centric sphere of influence around Russia's borders and the ending of 'frozen conflicts' in Eastern Europe and

⁹ Wales Summit Declaration, 5 September, 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm



Central Asia in Russia's favour. Putin believes that whatever weapons-systems NATO has at its disposal Europeans are so weak and divided that little or no military action will ever be taken against him. Putin may be right and his gamble (for that is what it is) could pay off.

First, President Putin must be disabused of his analysis. In the first instance that will mean NATO's strongest military powers demonstrating the will and the capacity to meet the Russian challenge. To do that credibly NATO must become a form of strategic coalition-builder with the U.S., U.K., France and Germany (with Canadian support) taking the lead in strengthening NATO's three key flanks – East, North and West. Some will complain that such 'leadership' is not in line with NATO's consensual decision-making. However, in this new age of power such leadership does and must reflect the realities of power.

Second, President Putin needs to be clear that NATO, an alliance of democracies, is firmly embedded in a world-wide web of secure, mutually-reinforcing democracies anchored on the United States and which will act in their collective defence.

Third, defence expenditure of all the NATO allies must move towards 2% of GDP and quickly to demonstrate to Moscow that no amount of money Russia spends on its armed forces will ever better the ability of the allies to out-invest Russia.

Fourth, the Alliance must mean what it says. Strategic unity of effort and purpose is key to deterring Russia. The new form of Forward Deterrence implicit in the Readiness Action Plan agreed at the Wales Summit is just as important as Forward Defence. In the event of a war with Russia (and that can no longer be entirely ruled out), NATO must not trade space for time as the British and French did in the face of Nazi aggression during the Second World War.

Fifth, Europeans in particular must take the lead in efforts to convince President Putin that Russia has nothing to gain from such an aggressive strategy. The West offers Russia its only stable border, energy exports to the West count for seventy per cent of all Russia's income, and Russians share a whole raft of security challenges with their fellow Europeans.

Russia today is a dangerous cocktail of power, over-centralisation and an increasingly idiosyncratic president who is reinforced in his prejudices by a security class (Siloviki) happy to use the West as the historical scapegoat of choice to justify their own uncertain grip on the Russian state. Therefore, NATO must do what NATO has always done: guarantee the security and defence of all its citizens, wherever they may be, and against all and any threat from whatever direction it comes.

► About the Author

Julian Lindley-French is Senior Fellow of the Institute of Statecraft, Director of Europa Analytica & Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow, National Defense University, Washington DC. An internationally-recognised strategic analyst, advisor and author he was formerly Eisenhower Professor of Defence Strategy at the Netherlands Defence Academy, and Special Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of Leiden. He is a Fellow of Respublica in London, and a member of the Strategic Advisory Group of the Atlantic Council of the United States in Washington. Lindley-French's latest publications include *The Oxford Handbook on War 2014* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) & *Little Britain? Twenty-First Strategy for a Middling European Power*.



► **Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute**

CDFAI is the only think tank focused on Canada's international engagement in all its forms - diplomacy, the military, aid and trade security. Established in 2001, CDFAI's vision is for Canada to have a respected, influential voice in the international arena based on a comprehensive foreign policy, which expresses our national interests, political and social values, military capabilities, economic strength and willingness to be engaged with action that is timely and credible.

CDFAI was created to address the ongoing discrepancy between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically, Canadians tend to think of foreign policy – if they think of it at all – as a matter of trade and markets. They are unaware of the importance of Canada engaging diplomatically, militarily, and with international aid in the ongoing struggle to maintain a world that is friendly to the free flow of goods, services, people and ideas across borders and the spread of human rights. They are largely unaware of the connection between a prosperous and free Canada and a world of globalization and liberal internationalism.

In all its activities CDFAI is a charitable, nonpartisan organization, supported financially by the contributions of foundations, corporations and individuals. Conclusions or opinions expressed in CDFAI publications and programs are those of the authors and speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors, or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to CDFAI.

