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Russia Hardens Military Thinking as NATO Fizzes Over Ukraine

By Matthew Bodner

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U.S.173 airborne brigade soldiers leave a C-17 aircraft during the "Steadfast Javelin II" military exercise in the former Soviet state of Latvia on Saturday.

As West's Cold-War-era military alliance cranks its belligerence levels up to 11, NATO's historic enemy, Russia, is rejigging its own military thinking in response.

In response to the harder stance confirmed at NATO's summit last week in Wales, Russian officials are revisiting the country's war doctrine, mulling its nuclear strategy and restructuring its military-industrial complex.

Analysts said a new doctrine — a strategy document that works as the prism through which a country evaluates and responds to threats — could re-establish NATO as Russia's primary threat and effectively set Russia's defense policy toward combatting it. Beyond that, the doctrine would formalize within Moscow's playbook the kind of small-scale destabilizing actions used in Russia's annexation of Crimea and continued incursions into eastern Ukraine,

they said.

Meanwhile, the Kommersant newspaper cited an unidentified Kremlin official reporting on Friday that President Vladimir Putin may take personal control over the Military-Industrial Commission, a body that acts as the state's regulator of the defense industry. The order has already been drafted and sent to Putin's office for his signature, and the decision could be announced officially as early as this week, the source said.

A few days before, a senior Kremlin security official announced that Russia would update its military doctrine, last revamped in the halcyon days of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's stint as president in 2010. Making the announcement, Mikhail Popov, deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, said the new doctrine would respond to the new security environment created by the Arab Spring, fighting in Syria and the conflict in Ukraine.

Voices swiftly surfaced advocating a hard line. Retired General Yury Yakubov, who serves as an advisor at the Russian Defense Ministry, said last week the doctrine should list NATO not only as the primary threat to Russia, but detail the scenarios in which preemptive nuclear strikes against the alliance would be on the table.

This would far exceed the 2010 doctrine, which sees NATO expansion as a threat to Russian national security without identifying the alliance as a primary adversary and reaffirms Russia's right only to defensive use of nuclear weapons.

Yakubov's position was challenged later by General Yury Baluyevsky, the former head of Russia's General Staff, who told Interfax that the new doctrine would not put preemptive nuclear strike on the table or specify a particular enemy.

The specific contents of the new doctrine have yet to be announced. Analysts agree it will classify NATO as primary threat but disagree on the significance of the changes and the impact they will have on the ability for Russia and the West to come to terms over Ukraine.

The rhetoric will be toughened, says Mark Galeotti, an expert in Russian military and security affairs at New York University, and the changes will likely bring Russian military doctrine in line with the kind of military practice seen in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Since Russia revised its military doctrine in 2010, two years after a quick military conflict with Georgia — another former Soviet republic — the use of its military has moved to favor small numbers of highly trained and well equipped troops working in unison with local militant groups to destabilize territories. Galeotti describes this approach as non-linear hybrid war.

Although they are unlikely to explicitly declare it in the doctrine, the document "will place greater emphasis on intervention forces: the thought that 1,000 to 3,000 troops in the right place and in the right political environment, as we see in Ukraine, can make a big difference," he said.

"If you're going to build these forces its because you foresee the possibility that you will be using them," he added.

Soul Searching

NATO members on the alliance's eastern flank, such as Poland and Estonia, have no illusions on the danger of this type of warfare. In the Baltic states, which have large Russian-speaking minorities, the conditions are there for Russia to hypothetically leverage another ethnic conflict.

The recognition of this threat has energized NATO. The alliance has struggled for 20 years to find an enemy worthy of replacing the Soviet Union. Now it has one.

Within the last week, NATO has adopted a "Readiness Action Plan," which will establish military bases in Eastern Europe and a rapid response force to protect its members from Russian incursions.

Moreover, NATO has stepped into the Ukrainian conflict by committing financial and material support to Ukraine and agreeing to conduct regular military exercises on its territory.

Russia, meanwhile, has seized on these developments to paint NATO as a serious threat to Russian interests.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said Friday in a statement that "the essence and the tonality of [NATO's] statements on Ukraine, along with the announced plans to hold joint war games of the NATO member states and Kiev in that country till the end of 2014, will inevitably escalate tensions, threaten the visible progress in Ukraine's peace process and facilitate a deepening split among Ukrainians."

This is a case of reflex reaction, according to Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, an independent Moscow-based military think tank.

The threats posed by China and Islamic radicals are existential to Russia and complex to combat, he said, but "NATO is a comfortable enemy due to the past and general public Westophobia."

Back to the Cold War?

Many critics of Western policy have also accused the alliance of reverting to a Cold War mindset, but analysts disagree.

"There is inevitably a level of habit [pushing NATO against Russia]," said Galeotti, "but I would put it more as bureaucratic impulse rather than a Cold War mentality. Organizations seek to have missions that allow them to continue to do what they are doing or enjoy doing and to acquire budgets to do that."

Tom Nichols, a specialist in Russian military affairs at the U.S. Naval War College said "NATO was well on its way to becoming a collective security arrangement rather than an alliance aimed at Russia, but Putin has screwed that up now and [NATO] firmly returned to its original task of facing Russia."

But the hardening of positions on both sides does not guarantee a long-drawn-out

confrontation.

Updates to Russia's military doctrine would not impede a potential settlement of the dispute, Nichols said, "The only thing that would make Russian doctrine a greater impediment would be for Putin or anyone else to take it seriously. Doctrines almost never function as true guides to action."

To back up the point, Nichols quoted former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger: "Nuclear doctrines control the minds of men only in periods of non-emergency. In the moment of truth, when the possibility of major devastation occurs, one is likely to discover sudden changes in doctrine."

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