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Russia Has Dangerously Altered the Status Quo

By Alexander Golts

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I never cease to marvel at our president's amazing foresight. After all, in 2007 he warned us of treacherous NATO's intention to encircle Russia with military bases teeming with troops. And now, at the recent NATO summit in Wales, the alliance reached the very decision that Putin so shrewdly saw coming seven years ago.

Of course, NATO only announced its "wicked designs" after Russia brazenly annexed Crimea and stirred up a "hybrid war" in order to establish control over southern and eastern Ukraine. Could Putin really have hatched those plans way back in 2007?

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said the decisions reached at this summit send a clear signal to Russia. As a result of Moscow's intervention in Ukraine, the alliance will form a very high-readiness force that can deploy to conflict zones in a matter of days and that will probably number up to 5,000 troops. That force will spearhead NATO's already-existing Rapid Response Forces consisting of about 26,000 soldiers and officers.

NATO officials stressed several times during the summit that the alliance has begun preparations for carrying out "the entire spectrum of missions." That presumably includes repelling large-scale aggression from the east, a scenario hearkening back to the days of the Cold War.

The list of countries expressing willingness to host NATO infrastructure speaks for itself: the Baltic states, Poland and Romania. And even if only a relatively small number of troops deploy to those countries, their presence indicates that NATO as a whole will respond if Moscow tries to repeat its "Ukrainian scenario" in any of these countries.

That is significant, because prior to the summit, Poland and the Baltic states openly worried that Western leaders might not have the political willpower to act decisively in their defense. And frankly, those fears were justified when considering the West's irresolute response to Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Now, the permanent presence of various NATO troops in the Baltic states and Poland guarantees that, in the event of an attack by Russia, NATO will provide its promised collective defense. And Moscow will now have to reckon with the fact that if it sends its "polite green men" into Latvia or Estonia, they will likely encounter U.S. and British troops there and provoke a direct military confrontation with the leading NATO powers.

Several times during the summit briefing, NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe Adrian Bradshaw made it clear that the newly created "spearhead" forces are intended to deter Russia. He said the current situation in Ukraine has made it necessary for NATO to conduct a complete review of its forces in the coming months.

He also said that NATO might establish additional headquarters in member countries near Russia that would have the authority to act in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty — that is, to quickly launch a military response to a potential adversary.

The "spearhead" forces will consist of a multinational assemblage of troops drawn from special units from specially designated NATO countries. They will rotate duty, moving between forward-positioned bases. The general also noted that NATO will review the tasks and composition of its entire Rapid Reaction Forces.

He pointed out that, although the planned "spearhead" forces for repelling aggression are relatively few in number, any potential aggressor should keep in mind that the full force of NATO's military might would soon follow.

Most importantly, Bradshaw said the "spearhead" forces might carry "not only conventional weapons." Asked to clarify, he explained that in order to serve as a successful deterrent, the forces must have the same weapons at their disposal as the potential aggressor. In other words, under certain circumstances, the NATO "spearhead" forces might carry nuclear weapons in their arsenal.

And although these are only hypothetical discussions at present, I suspect they are meant as a tough response to swaggering loudmouths in the Russian Defense Ministry who threaten to deploy nuclear-equipped Iskander missiles to the Kaliningrad region or strike future NATO facilities.

I repeat: these are rapid reaction forces with very high readiness. That means NATO is already preparing to deter what it sees as a potential Russian threat. In the wake of Moscow's actions in Ukraine, the West is now poised to take quite seriously whatever nonsense Russian politicians spout off, and to respond accordingly.

The Kremlin's actions in Ukraine have practically destroyed all mutual trust between Russia and the West.

It seems that NATO will no longer consider Russia — much less Putin — a partner for many years to come. U.S. President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron published an article in the Times of London on Sept. 3, on the eve of the NATO summit.

Of everything written there, this passage struck me most: "Ultimately by working together we are stronger, whether in standing up to Russia or confronting IS." Thus, Putin's policies have accomplished something earlier considered impossible: the West now views Russia in the same light as the Islamic State, a terrorist organization committing horrendous atrocities in Syria and Iraq.

The NATO summit officially acknowledged that, thanks to Russia, we now live in a new, more dangerous world. And this is a world that I most decidedly do not like.

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