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NATO, Russia War Games Fuel Risk of War, Think Tank Warns

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BRUSSELS — The increase in the scale and number of military exercises being undertaken by NATO and Russia is making armed conflict in Europe more likely, a think tank warned Wednesday.

Ian Kearns, director of the London-based European Leadership Network, told The Associated Press that the war games "are contributing to a climate of mistrust" that have "on occasion become the focal point for some quite close encounters between the NATO and Russian militaries."

Kearns is one of the co-authors of an ELN study, which looked in detail at two military exercises held this year by Russia and NATO and found signs that "Russia is preparing for a conflict with NATO, and NATO is preparing for a possible confrontation with Russia."

The exercises, according to the ELN, "can feed uncertainty" and heighten the risk of

"dangerous military encounters."

Relations between Russia and the West have been in the deep freeze since Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine last year. The ELN study said NATO plans approximately 270 exercises this year, while Russia has announced 4,000 drills at all levels.

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The ELN study said the exercises showed what each side views as its most vulnerable points: For NATO, it's Poland and the Baltic states while for Russia, concerns are more numerous and include the Arctic, Crimea and border areas with NATO members Estonia and Latvia.

The ELN has formulated a few ideas to defuse tensions, including for governments to examine the need for more restraint in the size and scenarios of future exercises.

"History is full of examples of leaders who think they can keep control of events, and events have a habit of taking on a momentum and dynamic of their own," said Kearns.

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