

How Russia Helped NATO Rediscover Itself

NATO Summit signaled to Moscow a reinvigorated Alliance.

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State leaders attend a working session at the NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland. **Markus Schreiber / AP**

The Kremlin will be struggling to reconcile conflicting messages from the West.

Deepening divisions in the European Union that came to a dramatic head with the Brexit vote have not found their way into NATO. Instead, the Alliance appears to have rediscovered the culture of deterrence.

The Warsaw Summit report devotes considerable space to the challenges Russia poses to European security, and it lists them in unusually clear language. It talks of the “ongoing illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea ... the violation of sovereign borders by force; the deliberate destabilization of eastern Ukraine; large-scale snap exercises contrary to the

spirit of the Vienna Document and provocative military activities near NATO borders.” NATO leaders also condemned Moscow’s “irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric.”

NATO’s decision to shore up its eastern flank by deploying four battalion-sized battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland will not have come as a surprise to Moscow. NATO had telegraphed its intentions well in advance.

The Russian General Staff will not be unduly concerned by the size of the deployments and NATO’s efforts to develop improved capabilities for reinforcing the Baltic States because it believes it has the necessary operational concepts and forces to counter them. However, the military establishment may not immediately recognize that it is Moscow’s behavior over the past two years that has woken NATO from its slumber and put it on a course to become a strategic challenge to Russia.

Russia’s actions in Ukraine have forced NATO to think once again in terms of focusing on its traditional core task of collective defense of both its populations and its values.

While the Russian military stands to benefit from this situation at least in the short run in terms of continued provision of resources for rearmament and an important voice in strategic decision-making, it is likely to be uncomfortable as well.

Its planners will not have forgotten the lessons of the 1980s when the U.S.S.R.’s inferior economic development, combined with heavy military spending, generated a threat to national security and forced a new generation of political leaders to seek to regain strategic advantage through detente and disarmament. From the military’s perspective, these policies ended disastrously with the break up first of the Warsaw Pact and then the U.S.S.R. itself.

Parts of the military system are likely to recognize that President Vladimir Putin’s efforts to divide the United States from its European allies have failed in both Ukraine and Syria.

The White House decision, reportedly against advice from other agencies, not to provide lethal aid to Ukraine preserved Western cohesion over Ukraine. Germany, in particular, opposed the move. The strong political support at the Summit for Ukraine and its territorial integrity is an indication of how Ukraine’s security has become coterminous with NATO’s in terms of destabilization of the country threatening broader European security.

Similarly, Putin’s intervention in Syria has not disrupted the U.S.-led Global Coalition to counter Daesh, also known as Islamic State. Islamic State is a terror group banned in Russia.

What will Russia do next? Judging by Sunday’s weekly news review presented by Dmitry Kiselyov, the Kremlin’s top propagandist, the message to the Russian population is that Russia is no longer a partner for NATO but rather a target and NATO is preparing for war.

Russian leaders, on the other hand, will likely respond carefully and not immediately. There may be no need for a response now beyond harsh words and further accusations of “anti-Russian hysteria” and Western provocation.

Russia has been working on a response to increased NATO activity on its borders since the

beginning of the year when it announced the creation of three new divisions on its western border.

Defending the exclave of Kaliningrad is becoming a particular challenge at a time of heightened tension with NATO and the region could become a new form of the Cold War anomaly of West Berlin given Russian concerns about its defensibility.

As a show of force both at home and abroad, the Russian military may finally feel compelled to follow through on threats to deploy Iskander missiles there in response to NATO's continued development of a ballistic missile defense system. Moscow continues to reject NATO claims that the system is not aimed at undermining Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent.

The Warsaw report also signaled that dialogue with Russia should complement deterrence, not replace it.

The NATO–Russia Council was born in the hope that NATO and Russia could forge cooperation to transcend their differences. When it meets at ambassadorial level on Wednesday, these differences will be clearer than ever before.

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