



# MILITARY EXERCISES AS GEOPOLITICAL MESSAGING IN THE NATO-RUSSIA DYNAMIC: REASSURANCE, DETERRENCE, AND (IN)STABILITY

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Military exercises are often viewed as geopolitical tools used to boost stability and enhance deterrence. However, they can sometimes have the exact opposite effect: increasing instability and contributing to dangerous levels of escalation. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of NATO and Russia.

*“Those people — the map people, the logistics people, the intelligence people — have always been accused, by operational commanders, of thinking more than is good for them, but this time they’ve got it right.”*

– Alan Furst, *Kingdom of Shadows*

In 2018, both the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) conducted their largest military exercises since the end of the Cold War. The role of such maneuvers in the larger geostrategic context has been brought to the fore by these activities and President Donald Trump’s decision, announced at his summit in Singapore with North Korea’s Kim Jong-un, to suspend the U.S.-South Korea Ulchi Freedom Guardian military exercise.<sup>1</sup> Official statements about these military exercises typically stress their specified purpose of improving training, readiness, and interoperability among services and multinational forces.<sup>2</sup> But military exercises also convey powerful geopolitical messages intended to demonstrate how the capabilities on display enhance regional stability, deter aggression, and reinforce foreign policy goals.<sup>3</sup> However, I argue in this essay that they can instead do the opposite, in the sense of the classic security dilemma, as real or potentially adversarial states ratchet up the size and scope of their exercises and push exercise venues into militarily problematic areas. In other words, the risk of geopolitical instability that such

exercises imply may not bring a corresponding deterrence reward. This is especially true across the increasingly tense NATO-Russia divide in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which is the focus of this paper.

The elusive line between deterrence and provoking aggression has been explored in depth in analyses of tabletop war games or simulations in the German *kriegsspiel* style. The most notable are those conducted by the RAND Corporation involving a hypothetical Russian invasion of the NATO-member Baltic states. The results provided the impetus for a more robust alliance military presence in that region and in Poland.<sup>4</sup> Michael Kofman has discussed at length whether this shift from “reassurance” to “deterrence” makes sense and, importantly, posits that a critical variable in this calculation is the perception of the Russian threat. He also questioned whether “conventional deterrence by denial is possible on NATO’s eastern flank.”<sup>5</sup>

Through my experience as an intelligence officer at the tactical and national levels, I became — and remain — acutely aware of the role that the threat, or at least the United States military’s assessment of the threat, plays in both planning and executing military operations. That includes exercises, a number of which I participated in. Later, as an academic researcher in geopolitics, I came to appreciate the influence of what Gerard Toal refers to as “thick geopolitics,” a concept that “strives

1 This decision seemed to catch the Pentagon and Seoul off guard. See: Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, “Trump’s Promises to Kim Jong-un Leave U.S. and Allies Scrambling,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/15/world/asia/us-trump-north-korea-credible-military-exercises.html>.

2 For an excellent overview, see: Beatrice Heuser, “Reflections on the Purposes, Benefits and Pitfalls of Military Exercises,” in *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, ed. Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier, and Guillaume Lasconjarias (Rome: NATO Defense College Forum Paper 26, February 2018), 9–25.

3 This paper concerns only major scheduled military exercises. Most militaries also conduct tactical training exercises and “snap” or “operational readiness” inspections, but these are difficult to enumerate and even more difficult to analyze. In the case of Russia, for example, see: Alexander Golts, “Rehearsals for War,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, July 5, 2016, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_rehearsals\\_for\\_war](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_rehearsals_for_war).

4 David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics,” *RAND Corp.*, 2016, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html). For a broader discussion of war gaming, see: Jeffrey Appleget, Jeffrey Kline, and James J. Wirtz, “Do Wargames Impact Deterrence?” in Heuser, Heier, and Lasconjarias, *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, 27–44. As war games relate to escalation dynamics, see: Jacquelyn G. Schneider, “What War Games Tell Us About the Use of Cyber Weapons in a Crisis,” *Defense One*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/06/what-war-games-tell-us-about-use-cyber-weapons-crisis/149206/>.

5 Michael Kofman, “Fixing NATO Deterrence in the East Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love NATO’s Crushing Defeat by Russia,” *War on the Rocks*, May 12, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/fixing-nato-deterrence-in-the-east-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-natos-crushing-defeat-by-russia/>.

to describe the geopolitical forces, networks, and interactions that configure places and states.”<sup>6</sup> Combining these two perspectives, in this paper I examine the strategic implications of NATO’s ongoing efforts to extend its reach eastward and, in some cases, northward,<sup>7</sup> by shifting its military exercise venues forward and including non-NATO “partners” in the alliance’s military operations and exercise agenda. The symbolism of these highly visible activities — which precede the Crimean crisis — is difficult to ignore, especially as they contribute to Russia’s geopolitical angst as regards its immediate neighborhood. Certainly, as Toal avers, the many multi-layered influences of location, distance, and place come into play here, especially given that some of these NATO-sponsored and member-state exercises take place along the Russian land frontier or its adjacent maritime zone and airspace. The reverse is also true, as Russia conducts large-scale exercises and other military demonstrations — what Mark Galeotti terms “heavy metal diplomacy”<sup>8</sup> — in that same contact zone. These exercises are viewed as threatening by many NATO states, some of which harbor unhappy memories of when this “thick geopolitical” landscape was dominated by Russia in its imperial or Soviet form.

### **Military Exercises as Geopolitical Messaging**

Military exercises do not take place on tabletops. Instead, warships, troops, aircraft, armored vehicles, and logistical and engineer support units maneuver across land, sea, and airspace overseen by headquarters staffs practicing command, control, and communications. A combination of live firing of weapons; cyber activities; collection, processing, and dissemination of target information and intelligence data; and after-action assessments all make for a complex and demanding undertaking, often at considerable expense and some element

of danger to the participants. These exercises also involve considerable fanfare in the host countries and, especially, strong visualization elements. As Roland Bleiker notes, “Images shape international events and our understanding of them.”<sup>9</sup> Certainly, images of warships, tanks, and live firing make for dramatic coverage, especially as they have become more incorporated in and widely disseminated via social media. These messages and images complement official foreign and security policy narratives and those of nongovernmental groups (e.g., think tanks and human rights organizations), and they should be seen as part and parcel of the larger geopolitical discourse.

### **The Exercise Is the Message**

The annual Foal Eagle joint and combined forces maneuvers,<sup>10</sup> conducted by the United States and the Republic of Korea, are an excellent example of how military exercises can be used to message strategic posture. In addition to the complexity and scope of these maneuvers, conducting them on and around the Korean Peninsula has become a highly contentious element in relations between these two allies and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.<sup>11</sup> In its press release announcing the 2017 iteration, the Defense Department stated that Foal Eagle “is designed to increase *readiness* to defend South Korea, to *protect* the region, and to maintain *stability* on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>12</sup> This is the template for the manner in which militaries typically describe their exercises and signal their import. And that language is understood to mean that readiness involves training, that protecting the region implies a specific geographical focus, and that stability (or, frequently, deterrence) is a desired strategic outcome.

Geopolitical messaging is conveyed via military exercises through several means by the exercise planners and their superiors. First, is the decision of whether to hold exercises. That means that starting, suspending, or terminating them is a

6 Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

7 As this involves Norway’s decision to push its defense perimeter farther north, see: Tormod Heier, “Towards a New Robust Defence? Norway’s Exercises on NATO’s Northern Flank, 2008–2017,” in Heuser, Heier, and Lasconjarias, *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, 163–85.

8 Mark Galeotti, “Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia’s Political Use of Its Military in Europe Since 2014,” European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, Dec. 19, 2016, [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Heavy\\_Metal\\_Diplomacy\\_Final\\_2.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Heavy_Metal_Diplomacy_Final_2.pdf).

9 Roland Bleiker, “Mapping Visual Global Politics,” in *Visual Global Politics*, ed. Roland Bleiker (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

10 Joint exercises involve two or more service components (air, ground, or naval), and combined exercises involve forces from two or more countries.

11 Herb Lin, “The U.S. and South Korea Should Conditionally End Large Joint Military Exercises,” *Lawfare*, Aug. 30, 2017, <https://lawfareblog.com/us-and-south-korea-should-conditionally-end-large-joint-military-exercises>; Helene Cooper and Choe Sang-Hun, “U.S. and South Korea to Resume Joint Military Exercises,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/us/politics/us-south-korea-joint-military-exercises.html>.

12 Emphasis added in excerpt from “U.S., South Korea Launch Annual Foal Eagle Exercise,” Department of Defense News, March 3, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1102331/us-south-korea-launch-annual-foal-eagle-exercise/>.

foreign policy and security policy statement in and of itself. This is certainly true in long-standing military relationships such as that between the United States and the Republic of Korea, wherein the form and scale of exercises have evolved since their inception shortly after the end of the Korean War. In fact, the major U.S.-South Korea exercise, Team Spirit, was canceled four times in the 1990s to facilitate negotiations to limit North Korea's nuclear program.<sup>13</sup>

## Once it has been decided that exercises are to take place, geopolitical messaging is conveyed in several ways in their actual execution.

Notably, the Bright Star exercises co-sponsored by the United States and Egypt since 1980 were suspended by President Barack Obama in 2013 in the wake of the military takeover of the elected Egyptian government. They have, however, since been reinstated.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. Central Command press release for Bright Star 2017 made no mention of the hiatus.<sup>15</sup> The Malabar naval exercises initiated by the United States and India in 1992 (and joined by Japan in 2015) presaged increased American interest in the Indian Ocean and Indian concerns regarding China's growing presence in South Asia. Although these exercises have recently expanded significantly, they were suspended for a period after India tested nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup>

The same cyclical pattern of scaling down and ramping up military exercises as political

circumstances change is evident in the U.S.-Philippines Balikatan exercise, which recently concluded its 34th iteration.<sup>17</sup> Disinviting the People's Liberation Army Navy from the U.S.-sponsored 2018 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercise was intended to signal U.S. displeasure at China's increasing militarization of islands in the South China Sea. (The Chinese navy had participated in RIMPAC in 2014 and 2016.)<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Russia and China announced that their two navies would conduct a second round of joint exercises in the Yellow Sea, and the huge Vostok 2018 exercises involved Chinese troops for the first time as part of a long-term plan of greater military cooperation between the two countries.<sup>19</sup>

Once it has been decided that exercises are to take place, geopolitical messaging is conveyed in several ways in their actual execution: *Where* the exercises are conducted, *how many* personnel are involved, *what countries* they are drawn from, and the *types of weaponry* employed are all key elements in strategic positioning or, one might say, posturing. Further complicating matters, the number, size, and scope of military exercises are growing — in some regions dramatically so — and at a time of heightened stress in the international system.<sup>20</sup>

### The NATO-Russia Military Exercise Dynamic

Nowhere is this expansion of military exercises more evident and potentially de-stabilizing than in the NATO-Russia arena. Since Russia's seizure of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in early 2014, tensions have risen steadily between Moscow and the West, with economic sanctions, mutual expulsions of diplomats and the closure of legations, and a barrage of mutual recriminations

13 Robert Collins, "A Brief History of the US-ROK Combined Military Exercises," *38 North*, Feb. 26, 2014, <https://www.38north.org/2014/02/rcollins022714/>.

14 Michael R. Gordon and Declan Walsh, "General Says U.S. Wants to Resume Major Military Exercise With Egypt," *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/26/world/middleeast/trump-al-sisi-egypt-military-exercise.html>.

15 "U.S., Egypt Kick Off Exercise Bright Star 2017," U.S. Air Forces Central Command Public Affairs, Sept. 13, 2017, <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1308877/us-egypt-kick-off-exercise-bright-star-2017/>.

16 Adarsha Verma, "The Malabar Exercises: An Appraisal," Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, July 18, 2017, [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/the-malabar-exercises\\_verma\\_180717](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/the-malabar-exercises_verma_180717).

17 Prashanth Parameswaran, "What Does a Bigger 2018 Balikatan Military Exercise Say About US-Philippines Alliance Under Duterte?" *Diplomat*, May 8, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-does-a-bigger-2018-balikatan-military-exercise-say-about-us-philippines-alliance-under-duterte/>.

18 Megan Eckstein, "China Disinvited from Participating in 2018 RIMPAC Exercise," *USNI News*, May 23, 2018, <https://news.usni.org/2018/05/23/china-disinvited-participating-2018-rimpac-exercise>.

19 Tom O'Connor, "Russia and China Will Hold War Games in Asia, Checking U.S. Military Power in Pacific," *Newsweek*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-china-hold-war-games-asia-taking-us-military-power-pacific-903251>.

20 Michael J. Mazarr and Michael Kofman, "Rediscovering Statecraft in a Changing Post-War Order," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018), <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/65634>.





not seen since the darkest days of the Cold War. Russia's interference in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, including the insertion of regular units of the Russian army into the fighting there,<sup>21</sup> and at least one major cyberattack on the Ukrainian power grid, banks, and government agencies, has exacerbated what was already a full-blown international crisis and catalyzed fears in the West — warranted or not — of a new and more capable Russian threat. Russia, meanwhile, harbors long-standing grievances concerning NATO's expansion into the former Soviet states (the Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and former members of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact in Central and Eastern Europe, which acceded to NATO from 1990 to 2004. Actions by NATO in the Balkan conflicts, especially the bombing campaign against Serbia, also invoked Russian fears of Western encroachment into what Moscow considers its sphere of influence.<sup>22</sup>

These increasingly contentious relations have resulted in a significant expansion of military operations on both sides. Russian forces continuously operate close to NATO forces in and around Europe as well as in the Middle East, especially Syria. Partly, this is because the NATO alliance now adjoins Russia along a longer frontier. Four of the newer NATO member states have land borders with Russia proper (Estonia and Latvia) or its Kaliningrad Oblast exclave (Poland and Lithuania), whereas previously only Norway directly bordered Russia, and that was in the very remote far north. All of these new eastern frontiers have become increasingly militarized. For example, almost from the moment of their accession to NATO, the three Baltic countries — with no combat aircraft of their own — received air defense cover from their NATO allies, a continuing mission that involves frequent intercepts of Russian military aircraft transiting Baltic Sea airspace.<sup>23</sup> The alliance

21 Ralph S. Clem, "Clearing the Fog of War: Public Versus Official Sources and Geopolitical Storylines in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58, no. 6 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2018.1424006>.

22 There is a vast literature on this subject. For an overview, see: Andrew Monaghan, "The Ukraine Crisis and NATO-Russia Relations," *NATO Review* (2014), <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/russia-ukraine-nato-crisis/Ukraine-crisis-NATO-Russia-relations/EN/index.htm>; Kimberly Marten, "Reconsidering NATO Expansion: A Counterfactual Analysis of Russia and the West in the 1990s," *European Journal of International Security* 3, no. 2 (June 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2017.16>; Michael McFaul, "Russia As It Is: A Grand Strategy for Confronting Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 4 (July/August 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2018-06-14/russia-it>.

23 The Baltic Air Policing mission involves heel-to-toe rotations of fighter aircraft to bases in Lithuania and Estonia. See: "NATO Air Policing," Allied Air Command, accessed Oct. 30, 2018, <https://ac.nato.int/page5931922/-nato-air-policing>.

also agreed at its Warsaw summit in 2016 to rotate “battalion-sized battlegroups” into Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in what it termed an “enhanced forward presence.”<sup>24</sup> Samuel Charap argues that Russia has likewise raised the ante in its standoff with NATO by using “its military beyond its borders with unprecedented frequency since the invasion of Crimea in February 2014,” referring to Russia’s intervention in Ukraine and Syria, and by its “brinksmanship in the skies and sea with NATO and other Western militaries.”<sup>25</sup> Finally, Russia’s extensive buildup of forces in Kaliningrad has significantly altered the military landscape in the Baltic Sea region.<sup>26</sup> As Dmitry Gorenburg has noted, the Russian Black Sea Fleet and its Crimea bases have been significantly upgraded, with more resources expected in the coming years.<sup>27</sup>

### Closing the Exercise Gap

The upshot of this heightened military activity is that deconfliction and avoidance of the kinds of catastrophic accident that could lead to hostilities have become an increasingly serious matter. As will be discussed below, military exercises involving these forward-deployed units are an inevitable consequence of their placement.<sup>28</sup> That is to say, if one forward-deploys or bases forces in a given region, exercising them in these locations is imperative — and the chances of miscalculation or accidents rise commensurately.

These exercises have generated considerable attention in both the mainstream media and in the national security and geopolitics commentariat. The Russian Federation and its allies have undertaken a

number of large-scale military maneuvers designed to test their troops and weapons, demonstrate their ability to defend the homeland, and convey a message of resoluteness in so doing. Russia’s large Zapad (“West”) 2017 maneuvers generated unprecedented coverage in Western media, think tank analyses, and official sources. They provided a prime example of how these events shape the national security discourse between Moscow and NATO.<sup>29</sup> In keeping with the universal exercise rationale template, the Russian Ministry of Defense described Zapad 2017 as “a final stage of joint *training* of the Russian and Belarusian Armed Forces [involving] interoperability of staffs [in the defense of] *territories* of the Republic of Belarus and the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation [to prevent] their *destabilization*.”<sup>30</sup>

Both in terms of its regional scope (the Baltic Sea region, western Russia, and Belarus) and the number of personnel and different weapons systems involved, Zapad 2017 certainly deserved the attention it received. But the ensuing frenzy, including concern that the exercise was intended to mask an actual invasion of the Baltics and Poland, exacerbated tensions throughout Europe even though that exercise occurs every four years.<sup>31</sup> Even before Zapad 2017, at least one American national security think tank raised the specter of an “exercise gap” between Russia and NATO, arguing that the former enjoyed a significant advantage.<sup>32</sup>

Vostok (“East”) 2018, another quadrennial Russian capstone military exercise, has likewise received extensive coverage in Russia and in Western media, mainly, but not exclusively, because the numbers of troops and equipment engaged may

24 “Boosting NATO’s presence in the east and southeast,” NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), Aug. 14, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_136388.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm).

25 Samuel Charap, “Russia’s Use of Military Force as a Foreign Policy Tool: Is There a Logic?” PONARS Policy Memo 443, October 2016, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russias-use-military-force-foreign-policy-tool-there-logic>.

26 Fredrik Westerlund, “Russia’s Military Strategy and Force Structure in Kaliningrad,” Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), FOI Memo 6060, May 2017, [https://www.foi.se/download/18.bc6b81b15be852194d71d/1494413062692/RUFS Briefing No 40 Kaliningrad by Fredrik Westerlund.pdf](https://www.foi.se/download/18.bc6b81b15be852194d71d/1494413062692/RUFS+Briefing+No+40+Kaliningrad+by+Fredrik+Westerlund.pdf).

27 Dmitry Gorenburg, “Is a New Russian Black Sea Fleet Coming? Or Is It Here?” *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/is-a-new-russian-black-sea-fleet-coming-or-is-it-here/>.

28 Thomas Frear, Łukasz Kulesa, and Ian Kearns, “Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014,” European Leadership Network Policy Brief, November 2014, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Dangerous-Brinkmanship.pdf>.

29 Keir Giles, “Russia Hit Multiple Targets With Zapad-2017,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jan. 25, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/25/russia-hit-multiple-targets-with-zapad-2017-pub-75278>.

30 Emphasis added to this undated Russian Ministry of Defense press release on the Zapad 2017 Joint Strategic Exercise, <http://eng.mil.ru/en/mission/practice/more.htm?id=12140115@egNews>.

31 Andrew Higgins, “Russia’s War Games with Fake Enemies Cause Real Alarm,” *New York Times*, Sept. 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/world/europe/russia-baltics-belarus.html>.

32 Ian J. Brzezinski and Nicholas Varangis, “The NATO-Russia Exercise Gap,” Atlantic Council’s *NATOSource*, Feb. 23, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/the-nato-russia-exercise-gap>.



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have exceeded Zapad 2017 (there is some dispute about the numbers directly involved<sup>33</sup>), which would make it the largest since the end of the Cold War. But it also involved an “interstate-conflict scenario” with coalition adversaries,<sup>34</sup> closely resembling what Russia would face should it wind up in a fight with NATO, though the maneuvers took place at a far remove from NATO territory. As such, the geopolitical message conveyed by the exercises, in particular the added element of participation by Chinese military units, was more subtle, involving what could be characterized as an in-house assessment of how well Russian armed forces could generate and manage a large-scale conflict from the command-and-control perspective.

Not to be outdone, NATO and its member states and partners likewise sponsor an expanding series of large and complex military exercises in close proximity to Russia’s western border and its adjacent seas and airspace.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, this has provoked a negative reaction from Moscow. Indeed, since the annexation of Crimea, the schedule of military training events involving NATO and its member states, as well as non-NATO partners, has become increasingly ambitious.<sup>36</sup> As a consequence, the “exercise gap” has narrowed.<sup>37</sup> This was underscored by the alliance’s top leadership at the NATO summit in Wales in 2014,<sup>38</sup> reemphasized at the Warsaw summit in 2016,<sup>39</sup> and reaffirmed at the 2018 Brussels summit: “We continue to ensure the Alliance’s political and military responsiveness, including through *more* regular exercises.”<sup>40</sup>

As is true in general of military exercises, these recent NATO exercises are intended to act as both training events and indicators of security policy



and posture. That is, they signal the alliance’s determination to defend its member states. Thus, several major exercises were conducted in 2017 with the aim of “assuring” NATO states bordering or near Russia (especially strategically vulnerable Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) and thereby “detering” Russian aggression. The evolution of the annual Saber Strike exercise series is a good example. Initially, from 2011, this exercise involved about 2,000 personnel, with a focus on training troops from the Baltic countries to NATO standards as a means of integrating them into the alliance’s operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> By 2018, Saber Strike had grown to 18,000 participants, with a clear focus on “validating our [NATO’s] collective capability to rapidly respond to and reinforce Allies in a time of crisis.”<sup>42</sup> From whence that crisis

33 Michael Kofman questions the manner in which the much larger numbers were generated, but the publicity from the Russian Ministry of Defense stresses the record size. See his article “Assessing Vostok-2018,” Changing Character of War Centre, Russia Brief no. 3, September 2018, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55faab67e4b0914105347194/t/5bae3876ec212d07ae601d68/1538144376047/Russia+Brief+3.pdf>.

34 Dmitry Gorenburg, “5 Things to Know About Russia’s Vostok-2018 Military Exercises,” *Washington Post’s Monkey Cage Blog*, Sept. 13, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/09/13/5-things-to-know-about-russias-vostok-2018-military-exercises/>.

35 NATO sponsors a set of exercises annually, and some of its member states or groupings of members do likewise. For an in-depth look at a NATO exercise and a Russian exercise, see: Thomas Frear, Ian Kearns, and Łukasz Kulesa, “Preparing for the Worst: Are Russian and NATO Military Exercises Making War in Europe More Likely?” European Leadership Network Policy Brief, August 2015, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Preparing-for-the-Worst.pdf>.

36 Ralph S. Clem, “NATO’s Expanding Military Exercises Are Sending Risky Mixed Messages,” *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 10, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/natos-expanding-military-exercises-are-sending-risky-mixed-messages/>.

37 Ian Brzezinski and Nicholas Varangis, “The NATO-Russia Exercise Gap: Then, Now, and 2017,” Atlantic Council’s *NATOSource*, Oct. 25, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/the-nato-russia-exercise-gap-then-now-2017>.

38 NATO, “Wales Summit Declaration,” news release (2014) 120, Sept. 5, 2014, [https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm) - top.

39 NATO, “Warsaw Summit Communiqué,” news release (2016) 100, July 9, 2016, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm).

40 Emphasis added to official alliance statement on the Brussels summit. See: NATO, “Brussels Summit Declaration,” news release (2018) 74, July 11, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm).

41 “During Saber Strike, Baltic Countries Train with U.S., U.K., Canada,” Army News Service, June 13, 2012, [https://www.army.mil/article/81683/during\\_saber\\_strike\\_baltic\\_countries\\_train\\_with\\_us\\_uk\\_canada](https://www.army.mil/article/81683/during_saber_strike_baltic_countries_train_with_us_uk_canada).

42 Undated U.S. Army (Europe) webpage on “Saber Strike 2018” exercise, <http://www.eur.army.mil/SaberStrike/>.



might emerge is not stated, but reference is made to the fact that the exercise is “not a provocation of Russia,” leaving one to imagine another major external threat to the alliance. In the same vein, the biannual Anakonda exercises organized by Poland have grown enormously since their inception in 2006. The 2016 edition numbered 31,000 troops from 23 countries with the intent “to check the ability of NATO to defend the territory of the eastern flank of the Alliance.”<sup>43</sup> Again, absent an attack from Belarus or Ukraine, the obvious aggressor state would be Russia.

But the clearest message yet that NATO intends to push the geopolitical envelope by means of military exercises came via Trident Juncture 2018, the alliance’s premier format. Not only is this the largest post-Cold War NATO exercise, with some 50,000 participants, but the venue, mainly in Norway, further extends the field of play. Hitherto, Norway, a founding NATO member state, had been careful to avoid antagonizing Moscow by allowing maneuvers in its far northern region, but, as Azita Raji notes, the mood in Oslo has clearly shifted toward taking a much stronger stance against what is perceived as an increasingly serious Russian threat.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Trident Juncture 2018 sends three geopolitical messages: that Norway takes its NATO commitment very seriously, that it will push back hard against Russian pressure, and that the alliance supports both of those positions.<sup>45</sup>

## **Can Anybody Play?**

Significantly, over the past decade NATO has

sought to integrate some non-NATO partners into operations and exercises, and in certain cases it has conducted large-scale NATO-, U.S.-, or European-sponsored events (including live-fire practice) on the territory of those non-member states, with resultant geopolitical implications. In the Nordic region, for example, Swedish and Finnish forces have participated in exercises with NATO, and NATO ground forces and aircraft have operated in Sweden and Finland proper in the two countries’ respective maneuvers.<sup>46</sup> Finnish and Swedish ground, naval, and air-force units participated in Trident Juncture 2018, with some NATO events taking place in both countries.<sup>47</sup> Such exercises and other steps that the two countries have taken to bolster their militaries have significantly altered the strategic situation in NATO’s favor vis-à-vis Russia in the Baltic Sea area while, predictably, provoking a negative response from Moscow.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, NATO has dramatically strengthened its military relationship with the Republic of Georgia through training assistance programs and major exercises. The highlight of these is the Noble Partner series, wherein U.S. Army forces (including tanks and other armored vehicles) recently deployed to Georgia from bases in Germany. Through participation in such exercises, some units of the Georgian army have met NATO operational standards and are included in NATO’s Response Force, a readily available and deployable contingency command for insertion in emerging-crisis situations.<sup>49</sup> Previously, Georgian troops had been involved in a number of NATO operations. With 32 of its soldiers killed in support of NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, Georgia’s casualty rate

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43 “The Anaconda-16 Exercises Begin,” Polish Ministry of National Defence, June 7, 2016, <http://en.mon.gov.pl/news/article/important/the-anaconda-16-exercises-begin-n2016-06-07/>.

44 Azita Raji, “The Perils of Playing Footsie in Military Boots: Trident Juncture and NATO’s Nordic Front,” *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 20, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/the-perils-of-playing-footsie-in-military-boots-trident-juncture-and-natos-nordic-front/>. See also: Heier, “Towards a New Robust Defence?”

45 Ralph Clem, “Today, NATO Begins a Huge Military Exercise. Here’s What You Need to Know,” *Washington Post’s Monkey Cage Blog*, Oct. 25, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/25/today-nato-begins-a-huge-military-exercise-heres-what-you-need-to-know/?utm\\_term=.9d70a0439622](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/25/today-nato-begins-a-huge-military-exercise-heres-what-you-need-to-know/?utm_term=.9d70a0439622).

46 Richard Milne, “Sweden Gears Up for Biggest Military Exercise in Decades,” *Financial Times*, Sept. 7, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/11e9a55c-93b3-11e7-a9e6-11d2f0ebb7f0>; Brad Lendon and Zachary Cohen, “U.S. Air Force to Send F-15 Jets to Finland,” *CNN.com*, Feb. 15, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/15/politics/u-s-f-15-finland-training-exercise/index.html>.

47 Finnish Defence Forces, “Trident Juncture 2018 to Be Organized in October-November in Norway, Sweden and Finland,” news release, April 27, 2018, [https://puolustusvoimat.fi/en/article/-/asset\\_publisher/trident-juncture-2018-harjoitus-jarjestetaan-loka-marraskuussa-norjassa-ruotsissa-ja-suomessa](https://puolustusvoimat.fi/en/article/-/asset_publisher/trident-juncture-2018-harjoitus-jarjestetaan-loka-marraskuussa-norjassa-ruotsissa-ja-suomessa); Undated Swedish Armed Forces webpage on “Trident Juncture 2018,” <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/activities/exercises/trident-juncture-18/>.

48 Sweden brought back military conscription in 2017 and is set to make major increases in its defense spending that will add significant troop strength, aircraft, and enhanced cyber capabilities. See: Gerard O’Dwyer, “New Swedish Government Advocates for Greater Defense Spending,” *Defense News*, Sept. 12, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/09/12/new-swedish-government-advocates-for-greater-defense-spending/>. Finland, which already has compulsory service, likewise plans to increase its defense spending and add manpower. See: “Finland to Increase Troop Levels, Defence Spending Amid Heightened Tensions,” *Reuters*, Feb. 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-finland-government-military/finland-to-increase-troop-levels-defence-spending-amid-heightened-tensions-idUKKBN15V25C>.

49 “NATO Response Force,” NATO website, Jan. 16, 2017, [https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics\\_49755.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_49755.htm).

in that conflict is higher than that of any NATO country.<sup>50</sup>

In the Black Sea region, the U.S. Navy has bolstered its presence both in exercises with Ukraine and NATO allies Romania and Bulgaria and through freedom-of-navigation visits. This was particularly evident in the Sea Breeze 2017 exercise, during which two advanced U.S. warships participated and also conducted a port call in the Ukrainian port city of Odesa. Russian news sources have featured prominent coverage of these NATO-Ukraine military maneuvers in the Black Sea. For example, Sea Breeze 2017 was not covered in the mainstream U.S. media (although it did appear in defense-related news outlets and on social media), whereas both Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today) had features on the maneuvers. Sputnik posted eight features on another U.S.-Ukraine exercise, Rapid Trident 2017, including articles in its German, Polish, Lithuanian, and Moldovan outlets. One can reasonably conclude that the signaling of military partnership, if not treaty obligation, is being received by Russia, and not favorably.

### **(In)stability: One Is Easy; the Other, Not So Much**

If geopolitical “stability” is a stated goal of most military exercises, a working description of how such stability might be measured in the NATO-Russia context is necessary. Although there is no universally accepted definition to reference, the specifics of *where* the exercise takes place, *how many* personnel are engaged, *which* countries participate, and how certain types of *weapons* are involved can be used to make at least a rough assessment of the extent to which these events might be *de*-stabilizing.

Using military exercises to advance the forward deployment of troops, naval vessels, and aircraft has been a feature of both NATO and Russian military planning and posturing since the

Crimean crisis unfolded, and it shows no signs of abating. Incorporating more advanced weaponry in maneuvers in forward areas is especially destabilizing as it alters the military status quo ante. For example, NATO used the Tobruk Legacy exercise in July 2017 to deploy the Patriot anti-aircraft and anti-missile system to Lithuania, the first time that such an advanced system had been positioned in the Baltic region.<sup>51</sup> Not surprisingly, Russia viewed that move as provocative.<sup>52</sup> The missiles were withdrawn after the exercise concluded, but the idea of permanently basing them in the region remains very much alive. During a state visit to the White House on April 3, 2018, Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid advocated placing Patriots in her country.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, since 2014, Russia has periodically moved its Iskander tactical ballistic missiles forward to Kaliningrad during exercises, prompting a warning from NATO that this presented a serious threat to the alliance and constituted a “pattern of continuing behavior to coerce [Russia’s] neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe.”<sup>54</sup> As it developed, these exercise deployments were, in fact, the prelude to the permanent basing of an Iskander brigade in Kaliningrad, a move that the chairman of the Russian Duma’s defense committee called “the answer to the deployment of military assets in neighboring territories.”<sup>55</sup>

U.S. Navy vessels equipped with the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System have participated in the Sea Breeze exercise in the Black Sea to which, according to one U.S. Defense Department official, “the Russians are particularly sensitive.” That same official stated that the Russians must be “desensitized.”<sup>56</sup> For years, Russia has expressed this “sensitivity” by conducting low-level passes over NATO warships operating on the Black Sea, often dangerously close to the vessels, and by intercepting and approaching NATO maritime patrol and intelligence collection aircraft. Obviously, these incidents carry a very high risk of collision or might provoke hostilities. On April 19, 2018, NATO’s

50 Denmark has the highest casualty rate of any NATO member state.

51 “U.S. Deploys Advanced Anti-Aircraft Missiles in Baltics for First Time,” *Reuters*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-baltics-patriot/u-s-deploys-advanced-anti-aircraft-missiles-in-baltics-for-first-time-idUSKBN19V28A>.

52 “US Moves Patriot Missiles near Russian Border in 1st Baltic Deployment,” *RT*, July 11, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/396028-us-patriot-missiles-baltics/>.

53 “Estonia Calls for Deployment of US Troops, Patriot Missiles,” *Euractiv*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/estonia-calls-for-deployment-of-us-troops-patriot-missiles/>.

54 Vladimir Isachenkov, “Russia Is Putting State-of-the-Art Missile in Its Westernmost Baltic Exclave,” *Business Insider*, March 18, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/russia-placing-state-of-the-art-missiles-in-kaliningrad-2015-3>.

55 Richard Milne and Kathrin Hille, “Baltic Concern Rises at Russian Missiles in Kaliningrad,” *Financial Times*, Feb. 5, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/ef93af1e-0a8d-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09>.

56 Victoria Leoni, “Navy Sends Destroyers to Black Sea to ‘Desensitize’ Russia,” *Navy Times*, Feb. 20, 2018, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2018/02/20/navy-sends-destroyers-to-black-sea-to-desensitize-russia/>.

Supreme Allied Commander Europe and the chief of the Russian general staff held a rare face-to-face meeting to discuss “issues related to military posture and exercises ... to foster predictability and transparency.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, despite previous such meetings, these encounters continued.

### **Fight Where You Train?**

By pushing military exercise venues further forward, is NATO signaling that it is prepared to fight early in a conflict with Russia in exposed regions such as the Baltic countries? The viability of changing the NATO/U.S. imperative from “reassurance to deterrence” in that context has been extensively critiqued as problematic at best.<sup>58</sup> Yet, this has not forestalled the view among exercise planners and think tank analysts that it makes good sense to demonstrate at least some capability

do not possess facilities hardened to withstand the inevitable attacks against them. They are also within easy range of any number of Russian offensive threats.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, because Russia has put in place the much-discussed anti-access/area-denial “bubbles” of sophisticated defenses around its western perimeter and extending well into NATO’s eastern flank, the alliance must confront a difficult question:<sup>61</sup> Is the geopolitical message that these exercises send essentially a bluff easily recognized by Russia as such and, therefore, unnecessarily provocative?

Along these same lines, what is the point of conducting military exercises with non-NATO countries if the alliance is not treaty-bound to assist them in the event that they are attacked by Russia? One could argue that the increasingly tight bonds between NATO and Sweden and Finland bolster the alliance’s Baltic Sea flank and that both of those countries have capable militaries and long-standing cultural, political, and economic ties with many NATO states by virtue of their membership in the European Union.<sup>62</sup> To some extent, Russia facilitates this drawing together for common defense by sending mixed military-exercise messages of its own: In the Zapad 2013 exercise, Russian aircraft simulated what appeared to be an attack on military targets in Sweden, a charge denied by Russia’s Ministry of Defense. More recently, a Russian special forces operation on an island 24

## **[W]hat is the point of conducting military exercises with non-NATO countries if the alliance is not treaty-bound to assist them in the event that they are attacked by Russia?**

to engage the threat far forward (e.g., Saber Strike) despite the realities of military geography.<sup>59</sup> As I have written apropos the challenges of a high-end fight with Russia from an airpower perspective, conducting military exercises close to Russia’s heavily defended territory where NATO forces are at a serious disadvantage is a singularly bad idea: Airfields are static targets, and most of those closest to the eastern borders of NATO countries

miles from the Finnish coast signaled to Moscow’s neighbor that the threat is close by, a point about which the Finns hardly need to be reminded.

Ukraine and Georgia present an altogether different geopolitical and strategic agenda that NATO and the United States seem determined to advance by, among other means, carrying out increasingly more complex military exercises in those countries. Certainly, the exercises and the

57 “NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Meets with Russian Chief of General Staff,” Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe Public Affairs Office, April 19, 2018, <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2018/nato-supreme-allied-commander-europe--general-scaparrotti-meets-with-russian-chief-of-general-staff--general-gerasimov>.

58 Kofman, “Fixing NATO Deterrence in the East”; Ulrich Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: A NATO Playbook* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/28/preventing-escalation-in-baltics-nato-playbook-pub-75878>.

59 Clem, “NATO’s Expanding Military Exercises Are Sending Risky Mixed Messages.”

60 Ralph S. Clem, “Forward Basing NATO Airpower in the Baltics Is a Bad Idea,” *War on the Rocks*, April 18, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/forward-basing-nato-airpower-in-the-baltics-is-a-bad-idea/>; Ralph S. Clem, “Geopolitics and Planning for a High-End Fight: NATO and the Baltic Region,” *Air and Space Power Journal* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 74–85, [https://www.airuniversity.af.mil/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Vol-30\\_Issue-1/V-Clem.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.mil/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Vol-30_Issue-1/V-Clem.pdf). For a contrary view, see: Luke Coffey and Daniel Kochis, “Time for the Baltic Air Policing Mission to Become the Baltic Air Defense Mission,” Heritage Foundation, Oct. 2, 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/time-the-baltic-air-policing-mission-become-the-baltic-air-defense-mission>.

61 Luis Simon, “Demystifying the A2/AD Buzz,” *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 4, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/demystifying-the-a2ad-buzz/>.

62 Coffey and Kochis, “Time for the Baltic Air Policing Mission to Become the Baltic Air Defense Mission.”

official statements made about them also form an integral part of the messaging from NATO and its member states to Russia. NATO places a high premium on supporting these two partner states and is determined to assist them in deterring Russian aggression. The exercise messaging would suggest that the maneuvers are for training (especially *interoperability*), defense, and promoting stability. But is that how it is interpreted in Moscow? Do the exercises in Ukraine and Georgia suggest that NATO or the United States is prepared to fight there? Does that make any sense from a military perspective? Finally, does conducting such exercises promote regional stability?

Interoperability between NATO and non-NATO members (in this case, Ukraine and Georgia) is a consistent element of messaging, appearing in the mission statement for Sea Breeze, Rapid Trident, Noble Partner, and other exercises conducted in the Black Sea region. Promoting interoperability with partner militaries such as those of Ukraine and Georgia makes a significant statement that the alliance is extending its remit and creating, de facto, an expanded military frontier into an unstable area with thick geopolitics. Simply put, why work toward greater interoperability unless the intent is to interoperate? The suggestion that these partners already operate with NATO outside the area and therefore should be able to operate by NATO standards makes sense. But when exercises are conducted in areas bordering Russia, that distinction will not be appreciated in Moscow.

Among other things, such exercises involve actual combat units of participating NATO countries, bringing with them heavy and sophisticated weaponry. Sea Breeze 2017, for example, included a Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser and an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, among the most powerful warships afloat. These provided an opportunity for Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to visit (and be photographed on) one of the ships at port in Odesa, where he could “emphasize ... that this joint training is our response to ideologists, organizers and sponsors of hybrid wars” and that the “Head of State

[Poroshenko] is confident that the training will become another resolute step towards achieving stability in the region.”<sup>63</sup> The parties fomenting hybrid wars and instability were not named, but, from where Poroshenko stood, the air distance to the Russian naval base at Sevastopol is only about 200 miles and is easily within the Crimean anti-access/area-denial zone that the Russians have since put in place.<sup>64</sup> Again, citing Dmitry Gorenburg, Russia is “mak[ing] it clear that the modernization of the Black Sea Fleet and the concurrent strengthening of Russian military presence in the Black Sea region [is] a priority to counter the threat it sees emanating from NATO and its partners in the region, including Ukraine.”<sup>65</sup>

In a similar fashion, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence noted during the opening ceremony of Noble Partner 2017 in Georgia that “The strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia is stronger now than ever, and *this joint exercise* is a tangible sign of our commitment to each other to make it stronger still.”<sup>66</sup> Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili used the occasion of the Noble Partner 2018 kickoff to denounce Moscow for its role in the 2008 conflict that resulted in the secession of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, saying that the participating troops “are standing on the territory of a country, 20 percent of which is absolutely occupied by our neighbor Russia.”<sup>67</sup> After Noble Partner began, perhaps responding to Margvelashvili’s statement (although he did not refer specifically to the exercise), Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev warned that admitting Georgia to NATO could trigger a “terrible conflict,” suggesting, at the least, that the presence of combat troops, including tanks and other armored vehicles from NATO countries, in a “frozen conflict” zone is viewed by Moscow as unacceptable and highly destabilizing.<sup>68</sup>

## **Conclusion: Is Exercise Always Good?**

Despite the vast increase in the number and scope of NATO and associated exercises, in

63 Petro Poroshenko, “President on Sea Breeze 2017 Training,” July 17, 2017, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/prezident-pro-navchannya-sea-breeze-2017-ce-nasha-vidpovid-i-42442>.

64 Loic Burton, “Bubble Trouble: Russia’s A2/AD Capabilities,” Foreign Policy Association, Oct. 25, 2016, <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2016/10/25/bubble-trouble-russia-a2-ad/>.

65 Gorenburg, “Is a New Russian Black Sea Fleet Coming? Or Is It Here?”

66 Author’s emphasis added to the statement. “Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants,” U.S. Embassy in Georgia, Aug. 1, 2017, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/remarks-vp-noble-partner-participants/>.

67 “Georgia Slams Russia ‘Occupation’ Ahead of NATO War Games,” *DW.com*, Aug. 1, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/georgia-slams-russia-occupation-ahead-of-nato-war-games/a-44916562>.

68 Andrew Osborn, “Russian PM Warns NATO Admission of Georgia Could Trigger ‘Terrible Conflict,’” *Reuters*, Aug. 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-georgia/russian-pm-warns-nato-admission-of-georgia-could-trigger-terrible-conflict-idUSKBN1KR1UQ>.



Western think tanks some still advocate “more big exercises.”<sup>69</sup> There is a strong contingent of exercise advocates within the U.S. national security establishment and among many allied governments.<sup>70</sup> Yet, as Michael O’Hanlon suggested in regard to the Korean theater, cutting back or even eliminating large-scale exercises can be offset by conducting more frequent training at the tactical level, using “state-of-the-art simulations,” or by conducting exercises outside the immediate vicinity, including in the United States.<sup>71</sup> The U.S. Air Force’s Red Flag exercises in Nevada and Alaska, which usually include units from other countries, are a good example of the latter. Although the lower visibility involved in small-scale exercises or those remote from geopolitically fraught regions reduces the demonstration effect in deterring an aggressor, they are also much less de-stabilizing, precisely because they lack the hyperbolic rhetoric surrounding highly publicized exercises such as Zapad 2017 and Trident Juncture 2018.

Military exercises in Europe since early 2014 have frequently involved bringing troops, naval vessels, and aircraft from opposing sides within increasingly closer proximity to one another, and have introduced newer and more capable weaponry as part of the fielded forces. The official messaging behind these maneuvers usually makes reference to the need to train in real-world conditions and ensure that units from different militaries can operate efficiently with one another. Moreover, the defensive nature of the exercise is stressed, often with the claim that greater capability will promote geopolitical stability and deter aggression.

But by incorporating non-member militaries in its exercises and other missions, NATO has ratcheted up the operational tempo of its forces in areas that Russia views as buffer zones and that are too close for its strategic comfort. Not surprisingly, Russia responds in kind and raises anxiety levels among NATO members and key non-NATO partners and, in some cases, increases the likelihood of inadvertent actions that could escalate into hostilities. Explaining the Russian rationale behind

the huge Vostok 2018 exercise and other Russian maneuvers, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated, “The country’s ability to defend itself in the current international situation, which is frequently quite aggressive and unfriendly toward us, is absolutely justified and has no alternative.”<sup>72</sup> Not surprisingly, U.S. Navy Adm. James G. Foggo, who commanded NATO’s Trident Juncture 2018, said that the rationale from his perspective is much the same: “NATO is a defensive Alliance. We’re not looking for a fight, but we are committed to defense and deterrence. That’s what this exercise is all about: training to defend, and providing a deterrent effect, ready to respond to any threat from any direction at any time.”<sup>73</sup> Certainly, both NATO and Russia have legitimate interests in maintaining readiness, exercising command and control of complex military operations, and assuring both their citizens and allies that they are capable of defending against external aggression. But the danger here is that the two sides are caught in an increasingly complex and dynamic upward spiral of military brinkmanship that will be difficult to manage if present trends continue.

If there is a way out of this dangerous course of events it might lie within the framework of the Vienna Document 2011, the latest version of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) agreement to which the United States, other NATO countries, and Russia (among others) are signatories. The document is “composed of politically binding confidence and security-building measures designed to increase openness and transparency concerning military activities conducted inside the OSCE’s zone of application,”<sup>74</sup> which is essentially all of Europe (including Russia as far east as the Ural Mountains). It requires all participating states to notify other parties of military events above a certain threshold and to invite observers to these events. The central problem here, as articulated by Olivier Schmitt, is that the heightened level of geopolitical tension in Europe effectively precludes the necessary updates and modifications to the OSCE document

69 Elisabeth Braw, “NATO Needs More Big Exercises, Too,” *Defense One*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/06/nato-needs-more-big-exercises-too/148980/>.

70 Lara Seligman, “Experts Question Wisdom of Canceling U.S. Exercises with South Korea, as Mattis Makes It Official,” *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/26/experts-question-wisdom-of-canceling-u-s-exercises-with-south-korea-as-mattis-makes-it-official/>.

71 Michael E. O’Hanlon, “It’s Finally Time to Deal With North Korea,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/opinion/north-korea-military-sanctions.html>.

72 Andrew Higgins, “300,000 Troops and 900 Tanks: Russia’s Biggest Military Drills Since Cold War,” *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/28/world/europe/russia-military-drills.html>. Jack Watling correctly points out that the exercise also serves a domestic political purpose: highlighting Russia’s growing military might as a distraction from the country’s social and economic problems. “Russia’s Vostok-2018 Exercise Is About a Lot More Than War With NATO,” *RUSI Commentary*, Sept. 7, 2018, <https://rusi.org/commentary/russia-s-vostok-2018-exercise-about-lot-more-war-nato>.

73 NATO, “Exercise Trident Juncture 18 to Demonstrate NATO’s ability to Defend Itself,” news release, June 11, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_155866.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_155866.htm).

74 State Department, “Overview of Vienna Document 2011,” <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/cca/c43837.htm>.

that would make it a more effective instrument for containing, among other things, the unbridled growth of military exercises.<sup>75</sup>

In Europe, a region with very thick geopolitics, the messaging incorporated into both NATO and Russian military exercises “risk[s] inducing a self-righteous bubble of understanding that is too far removed from the ground-level actualities in [the] post-Soviet space.”<sup>76</sup> NATO, in response to the entreaties of its eastern allied states and even non-member states, and at times because of ill-advised moves by Russia, has leveraged itself into territory that it would be hard-pressed to defend against a large, conventional Russian attack. Using their military exercises to message their interest in bolstering defenses in this inherently unstable geopolitical zone is a risky proposition, at best, for both NATO and Russia. 🇺🇸

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75 Olivier Schmitt, “The Vienna Document and the Russian Challenge to the European Security Architecture,” in Heuser, Heier, Lasconjarias, *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, 269–84.

76 Toal, *Near Abroad*, 298.