

• Author: [Pavel Luzin](#)

[Russia's Military and the Illusion of Symmetry](#)



The U.S. [will allocate additional resources](#) to upgrade its airbases in Europe in 2018. European NATO member states are [increasing](#) their defense spending. The EU [is](#) significantly deepening defense integration. NATO is [reinforcing](#) its infrastructure in Eastern Europe. All this is in fact a long-term response to the threat posed by the Kremlin to Europe's eastern flank.

Moscow, in confrontation with the West, inevitably perceives this response in a distorted way, as a potential threat that has emerged out of the blue. In recent years, Russia has focused on strengthening anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) military capabilities that would deter the West from a Yugoslav or Libyan scenario in the case of escalation in foreign or domestic policy. This mainly involves the upgrading of military infrastructure on the Baltic Sea (Kaliningrad) and Black Sea (occupied Crimea), and around Moscow. These three areas have in fact been turned into "[fortresses](#)." However, enhanced activity by NATO member states is foiling the Kremlin's plans to undermine Transatlantic unity. Consequently, Russia is going to look for new ways to win.

Feigning symmetry

At first glance, there is an unresolved contradiction in Moscow's military life. On the one hand, its [defense doctrine](#) does not rule out a potential war against the North-Atlantic Alliance. On the other hand, if we factor

out nuclear weapons, the gauntlet thrown down in front of the West has nothing to do with Russia's real capabilities. It is precisely this contradiction that makes the Russian authorities pretend they are on an equal footing with the U.S. and Europe in terms of military and political resources.

Russia is ostentatiously supplying its bases on the Baltic and Black Sea with new weapons and military equipment. And it is not just about A2/AD. For example, the country plans to create an [additional wing](#) in the Kaliningrad Oblast, equipped with upgraded Su-27 fighters in the very near future. This year the 152nd missile brigade, deployed in the same region, is to be [rearmed](#) with Iskander-M missile systems (a missile brigade can be equipped with up to 12 missile systems).

In addition to [air defense](#) missile systems and [coast guard](#) forces, the Black Sea Fleet received three new combat ships equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles in 2016-2017, not to mention six Varshavyanka-class diesel-electric submarines, also armed with cruise missiles, that began service in 2014-2016. In other words, obsessed with its *idée fixe* of confrontation with the West, Moscow is developing not only defensive but also [offensive](#) potential.

Russia spent 9 trillion rubles on the purchase of weapons in 2011-2017. Still, parity with NATO is unachievable when it comes to conventional weapons. It's enough to point out that the several dozen aircraft and helicopters deployed in the Kaliningrad Oblast are up against almost 500 in Poland alone. The Kremlin is only too aware of that.

Thus, the Russian authorities believe they will be able to cause irreparable military and political damage to individual members of the Alliance in the case of a military showdown with NATO (whose [likelihood](#) is greater than zero, although this worst-case scenario is still the least likely of all the hypothetical options). Still, we must bear in mind that the social perception of losses is different in Russia compared to NATO countries. Besides, the Kremlin truly believes (albeit perhaps erroneously) that Russian troops are ready to sacrifice their lives. Based on these calculations and the threat of a nuclear conflict, Moscow hopes that it will have enough capabilities to demoralize Europeans and Americans when the time comes. This is the only feasible explanation for all these newly created regiments, divisions and armies. Symbolically, the semblance of an equal footing between Russia and NATO in military terms is supposed to demonstrate to Russian society and Western elites the Kremlin's will to cling to power.

The classic "asymmetrical response"

And yet, Moscow is not going to limit itself to establishing new formations in response to the strengthening of NATO against the backdrop of the ongoing confrontation, which has not flared into open conflict yet. It is going to employ what was known in Soviet times as an "asymmetrical response": creating major military and political uncertainty or threats at minimum expense. The Russian authorities have a number of options at hand.

Option number one. Existing crises are maintained and new ones are created in order to undermine NATO and the West in general. Ukraine and Syria are the prime examples. One should also closely follow Russia's policy on Libya as a source of potential military crises, [including the](#) involvement of [Head of the Chechen Republic](#) Ramzan Kadyrov in Libyan affairs, and Moscow's friendship with Egypt and its close relationship with [General Khalifa Haftar](#). Any aggravation of the political situation in Moldova (including in Transnistria, a breakaway statelet backed by a Russian military presence) should not be ruled out, either; the same goes for Iraq and even the Balkans.

Moscow may also increase its involvement in Sudan and [Yemen](#). Russia is exploring ways to enhance its presence in the Indian Ocean, as indicated by the expansion of the support facility in Tartus, Syria; its new agreement with Myanmar on a simplified procedure for Russian warships to enter its seaports, and [talks](#) about opening a military base in Sudan.

To put it simply, while NATO countries are increasing defense spending and strengthening their eastern flank, the Kremlin is trying to drive a wedge between members of the Alliance — notably through its attempts at friendship with Recep Erdogan — and between the West and its traditional partners in the region — for example, Egypt and Pakistan. Moscow is also trying to get in the way of U.S. and EU foreign policy: most

notably in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine but also Yemen. The goal is obvious: The Kremlin is trying to undermine its adversaries' position in various parts of the world in order to impose its worldview.

Option number two. Constant pressure on Europe using a method of carrot and stick. The carrot are the prospect of lucrative pipeline projects, as well as the preservation of corruption-related benefits, which have been greatly enjoyed by European businesses and banks over the last few decades. The role of the stick is played by threats posed by the Kremlin, as well as damaging political tactics applied to a varying degree, such as with Syrian chemical weapons and with its cooperation with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. A number of factors are at play here.

To begin with, there are suspected violations of the INF Treaty by Moscow, making it largely ineffective. Secondly, there are incessant Russian maneuvers along its western borders, in the absence of conventional arms control (and Russia has had the [draft](#) of the European Security Treaty up its sleeve for almost a decade now). Thirdly, there is the upgrading of the missile alert system, coupled with its relocation to the Voronezh early-warning radars and plans for the reconstruction of a similar radar in occupied Crimea. The crux of the matter is that 5 of the 10 Russian long-range radars in operation cover Europe. They were the first to be built and upgraded.

As this indicates, the Kremlin perceives the European region as a primary missile threat. Consequently, it considers EU member states a potential target for its missiles. In fact, the situation from 1960 is being reproduced. At that time the USSR tried to force Western Europe to distance itself politically from the United States using the same threat.

Option number three. Russia's further political, economic and cultural self-isolation. The probable continuation of the Kremlin's policy beyond March 2018 will enable a consolidation of the Russian ruling class, which will increase uncertainty in relations between the US, the EU and Moscow. In other words, several years from now, reduced interaction may complicate access to reliable information about developments in the country.

Obviously, this option is the most costly, and quite risky for the Russian authorities. However, since the likelihood of war between Russia and NATO is greater than zero, the chance of Russia being further isolated is not science fiction.

It is noteworthy that the unresolvable confrontation with the West under the current Russian regime is leading to Moscow's continued asymmetrical actions.

Option number four. The end of the confrontation with the West. This scenario is only possible in the case of a change of power in Russia, the establishment of a real separation of powers and favorable conditions for business and the accumulation of capital within the country.

Tags

[NATO](#)

[military](#)

[syria](#)

Category

[Security](#)

© Intersection - for republishing rights, please contact the editorial team at intersection@intersectionproject.eu