

AMERICAN FRIENDS OF BUCERIUS

LEADING INNOVATIVE THINKING

The Decision to Arm

NATO is strengthening its military presence in Eastern Europe while Russia modernizes its forces. Is this the beginning of a new arms race?

By Matthias Nass

There are still two months before the next NATO summit on July 8th and 9th in Warsaw, but among those preparing for the meeting, the tension is already palpable. The summit could determine if the relationship between the West and Russia cools several degrees further, perhaps even moving us towards a new Cold War.

Since the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the annexing of Crimea in early 2014, the "partnership" - as envisioned by the 1997 Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation - is over. The West responded with sanctions and a return to the traditional collective defense against the East. At the previous Alliance summit in Wales (September 2014), they decided to establish new rapid deployment forces. "Reassurance" was the motto for the meeting, an attempt to alleviate the fears of the Eastern Europeans who felt threatened by Russia.

But "reassurance" is no longer enough for many. Poland and the Baltic states are demanding greater protection, and the United States and Great Britain are sympathetic to their cause. Suddenly a word is making the rounds again, one that is all too familiar to us from the times of the first Cold War: Deterrence.

Not that the NATO doctrine of deterrence had ever been officially abandoned, or limited in regards to nuclear weapons. Politically, though, deterrence appeared overcome, through arms control and disarmament encompassed, through multifaceted dialogue diffused.

Now there are soldiers and heavy equipment stationed in the Baltic states, so far only on a rotating basis: the NATO Russia Founding Act prohibits a "permanent stationing" of "substantial" military forces in that region. From the perspective of many Eastern Europeans, the Ukraine crisis has changed the nature of the current security environment and should supersede the original agreement, but other NATO countries, including Germany, remain committed to it.

And so Germany attempts to pursue both approaches: on the one hand it participates in strengthening the military presence in the East, and on the other continues to maintain a dialogue with Moscow. Not least of this was the role Berlin played in reconvening the NATO–Russia Council after a two-year hiatus. "We are constantly making offers," is the word from the German Foreign Ministry. Foreign Minister Frank–Walter Steinmeier has suggested that Russia return to the table of the G7, bringing the group back to eight members again. But he also knows that there is no interest in the US right now to send any such signal to Vladimir Putin.

According to one of his closest confidants, Putin himself has lost interest in resurrecting the G8. He is seeking instead to "promote" the BRICS Group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and anyhow considers the G20 to be more relevant than the G8.

In response to the plans to deploy four NATO battalions in the Baltics and Poland, Putin intends to relocate three military divisions to western Russia. Beyond this, he also could further expand forces in the already highly-militarized Russian exclave Kaliningrad, located between Poland and Lithuania.

And this is exactly what Berlin is afraid of, especially as missile defense systems are being built by the US in Romania and in Poland. Both developments – increased NATO military presence and American missile defense systems – could lead Russia to respond with an escalation. The biggest fear in the West: with reference to missile defense, Putin might choose to abandon the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in December 1987. The treaty required the United States and the Soviet Union to destroy their nuclear and conventional short- to medium-range ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles.

If we're not extremely careful, we could find ourselves facing a new arms race. Both the Americans and the Russians are starting to modernize their tactical nuclear weapons. A particular danger lies with nuclear-tipped cruise missiles, which both sides are currently working on developing.

So this could become the true theme of the NATO summit in Warsaw: the modernization of missile technology, including nuclear missiles and cruise missiles. Connected to that is what is known among diplomats as the "issue of false perception". Translated: Does one truly understand what the other wants?

We're trying to send the right signals, is the message from Berlin. Let's hope that they will be understood, not only by Putin, but also by their own allies.

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network, and was originally published in ZEIT Online. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.