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Policy Brief

Defusing future crises in the
shared neighbourhood:
Can a clash between the West
and Russia be prevented?

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Introduction

Over the last two years relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated to their worst state since the Cold War. Allegations of Russian cyber interference in the recent US election cycle in order to help get Donald Trump elected are just the latest indication of how bad things are. It is no exaggeration to say relations are already in a state of profound crisis and notwithstanding uncertainties about how President Trump will approach the entire relationship with President Putin, it is entirely possible that the crisis will soon get worse.

This paper asks how the two sides can best prevent that from happening while still defending their interests. It asks what a more effective approach to crisis avoidance and management might look like, especially as this relates to events in the shared neighbourhood in Eastern Europe. By 'shared neighbourhood', we understand - in line with the predominant EU typology - six post-Soviet countries situated between the enlarged EU and NATO, and Russia: Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The paper is organised into three main sections. Section 1 outlines the multidimensional nature of the current Russia-West crisis and explains the diverging narratives about the shared neighbourhood. Section 2 adds to that more general background a brief but focused examination of some of the scenarios that could trigger a further escalation of the crisis in the shared neighbourhood. An underlying theme of this second section is that European affairs are in a state of almost constant flux and that part of the challenge is not how to freeze the status quo but how best to prepare for change to ensure it does not become a new source of disagreement in Russia-West relations.

Section 3 of the paper offers a range of recommendations as to how crisis avoidance can best be ensured in future. It addresses both fundamental questions of strategy on both sides and options for the further development of particular crisis avoidance instruments.

The paper draws on much European Leadership Network work conducted over the last two years on particular aspects of the crisis. Its recommendations, however, which will be controversial for some, are those of the named authors only and are not those of the organisation or of the network as a whole.

Section 1: The Crisis in Russia-West Relations and diverging narratives

Behind the day to day headlines of the Russia-West clash sits a deeper and more fundamental disagreement between the two sides. This spans not only divergent narratives on what has happened in Europe since the end of the Cold War but different narratives on some of the fundamental principles that underpin European and world order.

Narratives on the European and Global Order

In Europe, the Western narrative stresses that an agreed European security order based on the Helsinki Principles and re-affirmed in the Paris Charter of 1990 has been violated by Russia in Ukraine since 2014. Even many of those in the West willing to overlook the earlier conflict in Georgia in 2008 as a complicated situation with no clear aggressor have now fallen in behind this view. Despite differences in perspective among members of the EU, the Union has been able to agree, implement, and on more than one occasion re-affirm commitment to a series of economic sanctions on Russia in response.

In the Western narrative therefore, Russia is totally to blame for the deterioration in relations. Whatever Russia claims as justifications for its behaviour, it is seen by most other players in Europe as in breach of international law. It stands accused of using force to dictate outcomes on the ground in Ukraine and of using its programme of snap exercises and its possession of large numbers of nuclear weapons to intimidate neighbours. In this narrative, the only way to improve relations is for Russia to fall back in line with its own international obligations and commitments under international law. Until and unless it does so, there can be no return to 'business as usual'.

The Russian narrative on recent events in the Euro-Atlantic area is quite different. It stresses the extent to which the post-Cold War order was built according to a Western design, a design that chose to by-pass President Gorbachev's talk of 'conflict transcendence' and replace it with the gradual expansion eastwards of NATO and the EU. In this account, Russia's legitimate security interests as a great power, recognised (as those of the Soviet Union) at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences of 1945, have been consistently relegated or ignored. The West, it is said, took advantage of Russian weakness at the end of the Cold War and as its institutions took in Eastern European member states those same institutions came to reflect the anti-Russian views of their new members.

A growing number of military and national security officials in Moscow now appear to believe, moreover, that the West is determined not only to overthrow President Putin but also to weaken Russia to the point where it might be effectively destroyed and dismembered. As a result, there is deep suspicion of Western involvement in the countries neighbouring Russia and also a fear of encirclement by the US and its allies. The Russian narrative on what has

happened in Ukraine, namely that the democratically elected Yanukovich government was overthrown by a Western and primarily US backed unconstitutional coup, is a part of this mind-set.

Beyond the critique of NATO expansion and claims that the West is interested in undermining the Russian regime, Putin has argued that it is the West, and in particular the United States, that has been the violator of international law in places like Iraq and Kosovo, and that the West violated the spirit and meaning of Security Council Resolution 1973 in relation to Libya, to turn what was supposed to be the authorisation of a no fly zone into a full scale bombing campaign.¹ Putin has further argued that such US interventions cause chaos and instability, undermine global capacity for cooperative engagement on common problems, and create incentives for other actors in the system to acquire weapons of mass destruction to fend-off US interference.²

It is in these wider accusations that fundamental disagreements over world, not just European, order become clear too.

For many in the West, the utility of the traditional notion of sovereignty has become questionable in recent years. It is being eroded by notions such as the responsibility to protect (R2P) on one hand and by the effects of globalization on levels of cross-border interdependence on the other. While the West, at least in the pre-Trump era, has sought to grapple with this and even embrace it as a new reality requiring much greater levels of multilateral cooperation, Russia is perceived as a state in denial of new realities with a view of sovereignty, formally at least, that is trapped in the past. It is seen to almost always prioritise preservation of the existing order, stability and its own narrow national self-interest over concerns over human rights or efforts to manage interdependence more effectively. It is also seen as hypocritical, ignoring the rights to sovereignty of its own neighbours whenever it feels like intervening in their internal affairs.

The Russian counter-critique is that Western narratives on 21st century sovereignty are not only a cover for intervention in the affairs of other states in the West's own interests, but that they also amount to a recipe for widespread disorder and confrontation on a global scale. In the Russian view, it is the failure to accept more traditional notions of sovereignty by the

1 The text of the Resolution can be found at: http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_03/20110927_110311-UNSCR-1973.pdf

2 For an account of the Russian narrative, and its consistency over time, it is worth reading President Putin's speech to the Munich Security Conference on February 10th 2007, available at: http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml and also President Putin's speech on the annexation of Crimea, delivered in Moscow on March 18, 2014, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

West that sows distrust, makes international cooperation so much more difficult to achieve and dis-order more likely. Moreover, in the Russian view, the West behaves as though it is the only arbiter of when an intervention in the affairs of another state is legitimate and often seeks to claim that mantle, whether or not its actions are in line with international law.³

It is important to note too, that this clash of narratives and ideas predates Putin's first Presidential term. Aspects of this clash were evident as far back as 1991 in the dispute over Western military intervention in the former Yugoslavia. What is perhaps different under Putin is that Russia has recovered enough stability and power to be able to make its views more effectively known and impactful on the international stage.

While it may be easy for some in the West to personalise the problem and hope for something different once Putin is gone, this is to underestimate the seriousness and depth of the Russia-West disagreement and to underestimate the extent to which the Russian narrative has very wide support among both elites and the public in Russia. That support certainly exists.

In many ways the dispute with Russia is not temporary but concerns a much older question of how Russia, as a major power, is to relate to and play a part in the European security order and international affairs more widely, what role for it is acceptable to other European powers and what principles ought to underpin the order itself.

Western narrative(s) on the shared neighbourhood area

While there have been efforts to present a single, coherent narrative about the Western relations with Russia and shared neighbourhood,⁴ Western understanding of the area has undergone significant changes since the early 1990s.

As regards the former Soviet bloc countries of Central Europe, including Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, their policy choices based on the "return to Europe" narrative⁵ were widely accepted and eventually led them to NATO and EU membership. However, the countries

3 For a fuller account of the competing Russian and Western narratives and for a report on a discussion of them involving analysts from both Russia and the West see, *Competing Western and Russian Narratives on European Order: Is there common ground?* European Leadership Network and Russian International Affairs Council, April 2016, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/competing-western-and-russian-narratives-on-the-european-order-is-there-common-ground_3649.html

4 See e.g. "The view from the West" chapter in *Back to Diplomacy. Final report and recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project*, November 2015, pp. 21-23.

5 With the underlying assumption that they were forcibly cut off from their European home by forceful integration into the Soviet sphere of influence after the end of World War 2.

emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union further to the East and in the South Caucasus were seen primarily as fragile “newly independent” states. While there was hope in the West that all these states (as well as Russia) would forge themselves into democratic and prosperous members of Europe “whole, free and at peace”,⁶ the enormous challenges of the transformation, coupled with the breakout of conflicts in Moldova, Georgia and Nagorno Karabakh, quickly brought down the level of expectations, prioritizing “peace” (or rather stability) over “freedom”. These countries were thus seen as potential source of threats rather than candidates for full inclusion into the main European integration institutions. Most Western European governments were tacitly willing to accept the emergence of autocratic “strongman” regimes (e.g. in Belarus and Azerbaijan), “oligarchisation” and rampant corruption (e.g. in Ukraine), as well as a strong Russian presence - as long as these regimes avoided creating security or economic problems for the rest of the continent.

Yet, this narrative of ‘stability first’ was challenged in the 2000s, especially by the politicians and diplomats from new NATO/EU member states and from within the area itself. It was claimed that the successful transformation of Central European states could and should be repeated in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. From that viewpoint, the end-goal of the process of Western engagement in the shared neighbourhood would be for the neighbourhood to stop being ‘shared’, and become part of the West. Most proponents saw this expansion of the West as the ultimate victory of freedom, human rights and democracy over Russian imperialism and domestic authoritarianism, and cited the ‘colour revolutions’ in the area as proof of the validity of this approach. This ‘transformative’ narrative saw Russia, especially in the Putin era, as an active spoiler in the process of Westernization of the shared neighbourhood.

Both of these narratives on the shared neighbourhood had an impact on the process of formulating the policies of NATO and the European Union, resulting in uneasy compromises. While NATO developed close links with some countries in the shared neighbourhood, primarily Georgia and Ukraine, and insisted on the freedom of all countries to choose their alliances, the Alliance also highlighted that it respected the position of countries not interested in closer links with NATO. Moreover, NATO stopped short of actually inviting Georgia and Ukraine to become members,⁷ tacitly recognizing that such a move would cause a major crisis in relations with Russia and could precipitate Russian counter-actions on the ground.

6 The vision of Europe whole and free was laid out more explicitly by US President George Bush in a May 1989 speech <https://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga6-890531.htm>. This ambition also underlined the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, <http://www.osce.org/mc/39516?download=true>

7 The formulation agreed at the 2008 Bucharest summit, that Ukraine and Georgia will become members of the Alliance, did not amount to a membership invitation.

The EU's narrative emphasised the voluntary nature of the approximation of these countries to the EU political, social and economic model of development, in the broad frameworks of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership (EaP).⁸ While some in the shared neighbourhood, as well as their allies inside the EU, saw it as the first step towards membership, the majority of EU members considered the granting of access to the common market and visa-free travel to the EU as the maximum level of EU engagement: the EaP was carefully drafted to contain no EU commitment to enlarge to the East.

According to the mainstream Western narrative on the shared neighbourhood, which shaped EU thinking at least until the Maidan revolution, the EU's engagement was not meant to undermine Russia's legitimate interests in its neighbourhood. The increased contacts between shared neighbourhood countries and the EU, and their internal reforms, would bring only benefits, and not become an obstacle to maintaining friendly relations, people-to-people contacts and economic ties with Russia. The claims that the EU was engaged in competition for influence with Russia, or pushed these countries towards making a choice between Russia and the West, were roundly rejected.

The pre-2014 Western narrative also underlined that the EU pursued its distinctive relationship with Russia, respecting its preference not to be included in a common framework with other countries.⁹ Also, from the EU perspective, in the case of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2013/14, European politicians and the EU made a serious effort to manage the erupting crises and act as facilitators of dialogue between the parties, rather than unconditionally support the pro-Western forces.

After 2014, the narrative of a benevolent and essentially non-political European Union engagement in the shared neighbourhood was seriously challenged. A new narrative seems to be emerging, supporting a much more assertive and 'politically conscious' EU presence.¹⁰ It is being argued that, given Russia's stance and the developments on the ground, the EU cannot reject responsibility for the fate of pro-Western forces and their nation-building projects in the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood is now seen more as contested rather than as shared one. In this newly dominant narrative, it is claimed that the EU has to be ready to increase its engagement in the East, be willing to confront Russia over its behaviour, and become much bolder in articulating its own interests and ambitions to actively shape the neighbourhood. NATO, on its part, has also adopted its stance significantly since 2014,

8 For an overview, see: A. Missiroli (ed.), *The EU and the World: Players and Policies post-Lisbon*, EU Institute for Security Studies, 2016, pp. 118-124.

9 The same case about pursuing relationship with Russia was made by NATO with regards to the functioning of NATO-Russia Council.

10 As seen e.g. in the focus on supporting resilience (state and societal) of Eastern EU partners put in the 2016 EU Foreign and Security Policy Global Strategy.

suspending practical cooperation with Russia, boosting its deterrence and defence posture, and stepping up practical support for Ukraine and Georgia (albeit with no progress on membership).

Russian narrative on the shared neighbourhood area

In the Russian narrative, the expansion of Western institutions in effect cut Russia off from its former economic and security partners. The addition of central and eastern European states to the European single market, Russian commentators have argued, reduced Russian economic access through the imposition of external tariffs (although this has been somewhat mollified by Russian WTO accession) and reduced Russian competitiveness.¹¹ In practice, the greater degree of regulation of the public sphere and recourse to more transparent legal rulings have indeed served to shrink the space in which the Russian economic model, centred on opacity and patronage, can prevail. The expansion of the Schengen zone has also significantly reduced the range of visa-free travel available to Russian citizens.

Russia has also claimed an interest in the wellbeing of, variously, ethnic Russians or Russian speakers resident abroad. In some instances, this has led to the issuance of Russian passports to de jure citizens of shared neighbourhood states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria), in turn forming part of a narrative legitimising intervention. This concept, added to economic and security concerns, forms what the Russian leadership, and to some extent the Russia people, view as a sphere of privileged interest. This creates a Russian sense of historical entitlement in those territories of the former Soviet Union and Russian Empire to which Western institutions and their 'interference' represent a challenge.

In light of these perceived interests, there has been a tendency in Russian policy-making to view Russian and Western actions in the shared neighbourhood as a zero-sum game, a net gain for one representing a net loss for the other. To a certain degree this viewpoint is valid; it is not plausible, for example, that a member of the EU or NATO could simultaneously be a member of the EEU or CSTO. It is in this framework that the Russian leadership perceives Russia to have lost ground in the 1990s and 2000s, which in turn creates an imperative that states within the shared neighbourhood should be incorporated into Russian-led institutions, or at the very least prohibited from joining Western institutions. Overt and covert Russian support for political groupings in neighbouring states should be viewed in this light, as must a flexible system of carrots and sticks, subsidies and embargoes.

11 Back to Diplomacy: Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project, OSCE, November 2015. Available: <http://www.osce.org/networks/205846?download=true> Accessed March 2017

From the Russian perspective, the West has made liberal use of direct political and social intervention in the states of the shared neighbourhood in order to steer them towards membership of Western institutions. Russian concerns about these behaviours are at their most visceral over ‘coloured revolutions’, whereby a regime previously favourable to Moscow is deposed through street protests, while the protesters receive tacit support from the West. In both Georgia and Ukraine such ‘coloured revolutions’ have led to a change in foreign policy away from Russia towards the West.

Whilst previously Russia had not exhibited the same suspicion towards the EU as it had towards NATO, with only the latter labelled a destabilising Cold War relic aimed at confronting Russia, the inauguration of the EU’s Eastern Partnership in 2009 proved to Russia Brussels’s determination to develop a sphere of influence at Moscow’s expense.¹² The proposal of EU Association Agreements for the states of the shared neighbourhood, complete with points on foreign affairs and defence cooperation, served to confirm Russian concerns.

The Russian narrative contends that activities of the West have infringed on legitimate Russian interests in the shared neighbourhood and continue to do so. The states of the shared neighbourhood represent for Russia a complex environment that defies a simplistic explanation based on revanchist imperialism. Russia maintains close economic ties with them, founded on the supply chains of the Soviet period, whilst migrant workers from these states are both a critical pillar of the Russian workforce and an importance source of remittances for the neighbouring states. The interrelation between Russian domestic problems and those of its neighbours also gives Russia a genuine security interest, in particular regarding developments in South Caucasus.

The post-Soviet frozen conflicts that dot Russia’s periphery, often presented as a uniform mechanism through which Russia orchestrates coercive control over its independent-minded neighbours, in reality also present Moscow with a complex set of challenges. Russia’s role in each of these conflicts differs markedly, reflecting its equally varied relationships with the states of the shared neighbourhood.

12 EU expanding its ‘sphere of influence,’ Russia says, EU Observer, 21 March 2009, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/27827> Accessed March 2017

Section 2 – Possible Flashpoints

The general state of affairs described in section 1 and the gloomy picture painted by each side's narrative about the actions of 'the other' in the shared neighbourhood, is all the more worrying because the European order is not static. Since the end of the Cold War alone we have seen the re-unification of Germany and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The continent has been witness to several recent wars, some between successor states of the entities now dissolved. The European landscape remains littered with borders that do not match ethnic and national population distributions, in a context in which the politics of nationalism is on the rise.

While many may see the core challenge for the European security order today as one of returning to the pre-Crimea annexation status quo, the real challenge can more properly be described as one of how best to manage the tensions and dangers of a process of change in Europe that has yet to run its course.

In this context, it is possible to foresee future points of conflict and confrontation with a potential to pit Russia and the West against each other. This danger resides not only in close Russia-NATO military encounters that may spiral out of control, but in rapid or unexpected change that could take place in states in the shared neighbourhood. If and when such change does occur, it is hard to believe that Russia and the West would share a common account of what has happened and why.

In this section of the paper, we therefore identify five possible scenarios with the potential to negatively influence the trajectory of Russia-West relations. We make no claim regarding the relative likelihood of these scenarios or the list being exhaustive.¹³ We simply aim to give a flavour of some events that are both within the bounds of possibility and could make Russia-West relations even worse.

Scenario 1: A Belarusian Power Crisis

Belarus remains an important but all too often overlooked factor in the current Russia-West confrontation. With a long, porous border with Russia to the east, borders with NATO and EU members Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to the West and north (only a short stretch of Polish territory separates Belarus from Russia's Kaliningrad exclave), and with a still unstable Ukraine to the south, Belarus occupies a pivotal geopolitical space.

¹³ We do not follow the usual list of so-called 'frozen conflicts' in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. We consider sudden escalation in Transnistria unlikely, and consider that escalation of the conflict in or around Nagorno Karabakh would not necessarily pit Russia and the West against each other.

A relatively stable post-independence period under President Lukashenko predicated on close economic ties with Russia has increasingly come under strain following the occupation and annexation of Crimea. Reticent about formally recognising the annexation, the Belarusian leadership has attempted to balance between Russia and the West in order to mitigate as much as possible the economic damage of the confrontation. This is exemplified by President Lukashenko's offer of Minsk as the host city for Eastern Ukraine ceasefire negotiations.

Nevertheless Belarus remains closely linked to Russia both culturally and through a number of integrative economic and military agreements. Belarus was a founding member of the Russian-led customs union that eventually became the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and remains an important member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Belarusian membership of the latter has led to Russian efforts to incorporate Belarusian territory into its air defence network and the respective armed forces of the two states regularly exercise together. Belarus and Russia also form a loosely defined Union State, in effect facilitating freedom of movement between the two countries.

Any challenge to this arrangement would face fierce opposition from the Russian government. Indeed, recent Belarusian efforts to expand its political and economic freedom of manoeuvre through greater contacts with the West (while continuing to enjoy the benefits of low oil and gas prices and wide access to the Russian market) have already drawn harsh criticism from the Russian media.¹⁴ They have also resulted in a hardening of Russia's policy towards Belarus, including the establishment of a security zone with passport control along the border.¹⁵

Belarus' alignment with Russia is certainly evolving and it cannot be assumed that it will be permanent. Indeed, one recent wargame conducted by a Western think tank questioned the long-held assumption that, in the event of a NATO-Russia conflict, Belarus would automatically act on behalf of Russia.¹⁶ Should such projections be given equal credence in Moscow, this would be an important shift with serious ramifications for European stability.

While critical of some aspects of Russian policy and bilateral relations, President Lukashenko nevertheless seems committed to maintaining close relations with the Kremlin. However,

14 Bentzen, Naja, Belarus's parliamentary elections: Déjà vu? European Parliamentary Research Service, 8 September 2016 [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/586663/EPRS_ATA\(2016\)586663_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2016/586663/EPRS_ATA(2016)586663_EN.pdf) Accessed January 2017

15 Russia Establishes Security Zone On Belarusian Border, RFE/RL, 1 February 2017, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-belarus-border-security-zone/28273799.html> Accessed March 2017

16 Are Moscow and the West Swapping Positions on Belarus?, Eurasian Daily Monitor, 31 January 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-West-swapping-positions-belarus/> Accessed March 2017

challenges to the political status-quo within Belarus, for example catalysed by the unexpected death or incapacitation of an ageing Lukashenko would, in all likelihood, bring corresponding challenges to Belarus' international position. Uncertainty over who will succeed Lukashenko complicates the assessment of what could happen next, with the position of key actors, such as the Belarusian armed forces, nomenklatura, and security services, unclear. A relatively orderly succession based on the status quo, such as that in Uzbekistan following the death of Islam Karimov in September 2016, cannot be assumed.

In the event of a prolonged succession crisis and questions over the future direction of the country, direct Russian intervention becomes a very real possibility. Whilst the Belarusian authorities have made clear statements that the appearance of any unannounced armed forces on their territory will be immediately treated as hostile, acting on this rhetoric might prove difficult. The overwhelming predominance of the Russian language and Russian state media in Belarus gives the Kremlin an outsized influence on Belarusian national opinion, whilst likely large scale infiltration of the Belarusian security services by Russian operatives or sympathisers, similar to that apparent in Ukraine in late 2013 and 2014, might inhibit an effective response to any Russian intervention.

On the other hand, a succession crisis might also give space for the reconstitution of the Belarusian democratic opposition movement. The opposition is currently fractured and cowed. It fears provoking a Russian intervention via a Belarusian 'Maidan', and seems tacitly to see the Lukashenko regime as the best guarantor of an independent Belarus. Yet, a power vacuum during a succession period might alter this calculus. It might also activate individuals or groups that were not politically active earlier. The emergence of a massed opposition during a period of regime division, most likely calling for full democratization, would be highly volatile.

The activities of the West, and especially the EU, would also be pivotal. It is easy to see why the preservation of Belarusian independence has so far taken precedence among European policy makers over an agenda based on full democratisation. Yet it may not be possible to maintain a carefully calibrated EU policy towards Belarus in the event of a succession crisis involving Russia, and in the context of an internal struggle for democratization. Belarus' EU neighbours especially would face public and legislative pressure to support any such democratic movement against a reactionary and authoritarian state structure, and against Russia. It is also conceivable that private citizens from EU states would participate in or support anti-establishment protests. Such developments would be viewed with the deepest concern in Moscow, representing as they would a threat to Russia's economic and security partnership with Belarus and the potential beginning of another 'colour revolution'.

As in Ukraine in 2013/14, Russian and Western actors would face a complex crisis environment permeated by mutual misunderstandings. An unstable Belarus is not in the

interest of any of its neighbours, but it would be a challenge to agree on any joint West-Russia response that would be coordinated or predicated on a common assessment of how to stabilise the country. Whether any post-Lukashenko leadership could on its own find a way to navigate a path to that outcome without alienating the EU, Russia, or both seems highly questionable.

Scenario 2: Escalating Hostilities in Eastern Ukraine

The next scenario of concern relates to the danger of escalating hostilities in Eastern Ukraine. Whilst the large scale manoeuvre warfare that determined the current frontline between the Ukrainian armed forces and the Russian-backed separatists ceased in 2016, lower level exchanges of artillery and small arms fire across the line of contact have continued to claim lives on a weekly basis.

There may be multiple motivations for escalating this conflict, for both national and sub-national actors. The intensification of fighting and military manoeuvres within the partially demilitarised security zone in late 2016 and early 2017, focused on the area of Avdiyivka, is indicative of this. Concerns have been raised relating to the instrumentalisation of the conflict by both Moscow and Kiev for forging better relations with the new US administration. The sharp uptick in fighting following the initial phone conversation between Presidents Trump and Putin lends credence to these concerns.¹⁷ The low profile given to the Ukrainian conflict by the Trump administration may be seen by the Kremlin and its proxies as an opportunity to push for territorial gain in an effort to enforce a settlement of the conflict on favourable terms. Similarly, concern in Kiev that US support may be progressively lessened could lead to a military push in order to consolidate disputed territory where possible or to launch a minor offensive in order to underline the importance of the Ukrainian issue to the world.

Furthermore, the conflict in the Donbas is defined by the multiplicity of decentralised and loosely coordinated fighting units on both sides: to dismiss the agency of these actors is a mistake. In such an environment, it is plausible for example that, in response to a perceived action from the other side, a Donbass separatist unit launches a localised assault on Ukrainian positions that rapidly draws in other forces. In such circumstances it would be difficult for the separatist leadership and their Russian backers to disavow such an action, creating the risk of further escalation.

It should not be assumed that outside actors, including the US, NATO and the EU, could remain on the side-lines of greater conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Any military breakthrough that resulted in one side conquering large swathes of territory currently held by the other

17 'Our Tanks Are Ready': Ukraine Braces For Escalation In Eastern War, RFE/RL, 3 February 2017, <http://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-avdiyivka-fighting-escalation/28276963.html> Accessed March 2017

side, a threat to or conquest of major population centres, or the collapse of either the Ukrainian or separatist armed forces, would create great pressure for further intervention by outside actors. For example, it remains very unlikely that Russia would permit a Ukrainian re-conquest of the separatist republics' territory, as this would run counter to Moscow's objective of reconfiguring Ukraine on a federal basis, in which Russian-backed regions would wield vetoes on key policy decisions. Similarly, a successful offensive by separatist and Russian forces would not only mobilize Ukraine but also re-open, at the very least, the Western debate on the provision of lethal offensive equipment to Ukraine and on increasing the severity of the sanctions on Russia. That would put Russia and the West at loggerheads again.

Scenario 3: Renewed Confrontation in Georgia

Whilst the sporadic spikes in violence that used to occur along the lines of contact between the armed forces of Georgia and Abkhazia and Georgia and South Ossetia have ceased in the years following the August 2008 war, one aspect of that conflict retains escalatory potential.

A phenomenon limited to the South Ossetian border, viewed as *de jure* by Moscow and as the border of a *de facto* occupied territory by the West, is the persistent creeping capture of Tbilisi-controlled territory. Since the 2008 war, Russian and South Ossetian soldiers and border guards have taken to moving South Ossetian border markers deeper into Georgian territory under the cover of night, at one point advancing more than a kilometre. This gain is then consolidated with more permanent border infrastructure and the expulsion of Georgian residents caught on the wrong side of the new border. The Georgian authorities and the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia have proved powerless to intervene.

This dynamic cannot continue indefinitely. Despite the more guarded tones of the new Georgian parliament vis-à-vis Russia, at some point a firmer response to this encroaching annexation may have to be made.

Aside from the forced eviction of Georgian citizens and their regular detention,¹⁸ this issue is given prominence due to the proximity of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline operated by BP, an important export route bringing Azeri oil to Western markets. Indeed, in July 2015 it was reported that, following a Russian/South Ossetian seizure of territory, Georgia lost control of a small section of the pipeline, threatening the security of the project.¹⁹ Whilst this issue was

18 Border Incidents Near South Ossetia, Democracy and Freedom Watch, <http://dfwatch.net/tag/border-incidents-near-south-ossetia> Accessed March 2017

19 Breakway Republic of South Ossetia Claims More of Georgia's Territory, Moscow Times, 13 July 2015, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/breakway-republic-of-south-ossetia-claims-more-of-georgias-terri->

resolved by the diversion of the pipeline,²⁰ Georgia's position as a trans-Caucasian transit route has been called into question. The EU condemned the de facto authorities,²¹ whilst Russia has criticised what it termed intrusions by Georgian citizens and EU representatives into South Ossetian territory.²²

It is certainly conceivable in such fraught circumstances that a lethal clash could take place, overwhelming the existing border management mechanisms and pitting the EU and Russia against each other. It is possible that such a clash could occur as a deliberate act of policy. But it could also result from decisions taken by local actors on the ground. A lethal clash between dispossessed Georgian villagers and Russian or South Ossetian border guards is not inconceivable, nor would be a counter-retaliation and subsequent involvement of larger units and heavy weapons on both sides. Such a progressive escalation could overwhelm existing conflict management mechanisms and possibly put EU personnel directly in harm's way. Escalation would inevitably draw in the Russian military units based in South Ossetia, with Russia's bi-lateral defence agreements with the de facto Tskhinvali authorities providing a basis for reinforcements. Appeals by Tbilisi to NATO, the EU, and their member states would rapidly internationalise the conflict and severely challenge Russia-West relations.

Scenario 4: A Lethal Military Incident in the Baltic or Black Sea

As Russia, NATO, and other regional states build-up their militaries and adjust their force postures, military encounters and airspace violations continue apace.²³ The overtly aggressive nature of some of these encounters, including high speed, low level passes of warships by fighter aircraft and the obstructive interception of reconnaissance aircraft, carry an inherent risk of escalation. This is not to suggest that any actor intends to directly assault another, but that in an increasingly congested space the risk of an accident and the unintended escalation that may result is a serious possibility. The uncoordinated and

tory-48095 Accessed March 2017

20 Georgia resolves issue of Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, AzerNews, 7 August 2015, http://www.azernews.az/oil_and_gas/86521.html Accessed March 2017

21 Donald Tusk visits Georgia, takes sides in border dispute, Democracy and Freedom Watch, 21 July 2015, <http://dfwatch.net/donald-tusk-visits-georgia-takes-sides-in-border-dispute-37315> Accessed March 2017

22 Russian FM Concerned over Continuing Incidents on the Georgian-South Ossetian Border, World Affairs Journal, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/content/russian-fm-concerned-over-continuing-incidents-georgian-south-ossetian-border> Accessed December 2016

23 See for example, Interactive Map of Russia-West Dangerous Military Encounters Updated, December 2014, and Russia-West Dangerous Brinkmanship Continues, March 2015. A piece that presents a selection of incidents across the period between 2014-2016 and another interactive map can be found in Thomas Frear and Denitsa Raynova, *Russia-West Military Incidents: Skirting the Law*.

incomplete patchwork of multilateral and bilateral agreements that cover such encounters exacerbates this risk. By way of example, Finland, the airspace of which is regularly encroached upon by Russian aircraft, has no agreement in place with Russia governing the behaviour of the two countries' aircraft when they are in close proximity. This ambiguity is dangerous. The lack of mechanisms to govern encounters and accidents, should they occur, runs the risk of political leaders being forced to respond to events spontaneously, a situation in which the pressure to escalate will be high.

This issue is given added complexity in the shared neighbourhood due to the disputed presence of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The de facto border between Russian-occupied Crimea and mainland Ukraine has seen a number of incidents, including the detention of Russian military personnel by Ukraine and the arrest of alleged Ukrainian saboteurs by Russia.²⁴ Furthermore, in February 2017 the Ukrainian military claimed that one of its transport aircraft flying near Sevastopol was hit by Russian anti-aircraft fire before returning to base.²⁵ Whilst such incidents have thus far not led to escalation, they remain unregulated in any formal way and could very quickly add a new active front to the low-level conflict in the Donbas, again pressuring Russia and Western actors into greater intervention.

The Ukrainian conflict has also served to highlight the precariousness of the Russian military presence in Transnistria. Ukrainian restrictions on Russian transit to the de facto entity via the Odessa region pose a serious logistical challenge for the 1,000 strong Russian operational group in the territory.²⁶ Such restrictions leave Russia reliant on Chisinau airport as the main supply node for its Transnistrian contingent, an untenable position should relations between Chisinau and Tiraspol worsen. In response to these developments Russia has increased its recruitment of Transnistrian residents into the Russian armed forces,²⁷ whilst it has been suggested that Russia should work to reopen Tiraspol airport as a supply route of last resort (the airport has already been restored to a condition whereby it could receive military cargo

24 Ukraine detains Russian soldiers on Crimea border, Financial Times, 22 November 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/22fa9cd8-b089-11e6-a37c-f4a01f1b0fa1> Accessed March 2017

25 Ukraine Says Russia Fired On Military Transport Plane Over Black Sea, RFE/RL, 1 February 2017, <http://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-says-russia-fires-on-cargo-plane-black-sea-crimea/28273559.html> Accessed March 2017

26 These restrictions do not apply to the 500 Russian personnel deployed as a part of the trilateral peacekeeping force.

27 Moldova asks Russia's Army to Stop Recruiting it's Citizens, Newsweek, 22 June 2016, <http://europa.newsweek.com/moldova-asks-russia-separatist-army-stop-recruiting-citizens-473155?rm=eu> Accessed March 2017

aircraft).²⁸ Such a policy would require either the government of Ukraine or of Moldova to grant transit through their airspace, a political difficulty that is readily acknowledged by the Transnistrian authorities.²⁹ Should Russian access to its Transnistrian contingent continue to be restricted or conditions arise that put that contingent in physical danger it is conceivable that Russia may attempt to transit Moldovan or Ukrainian airspace illicitly. This option may also be used if Russia decides at some point to aggravate tensions with Moldova to affect its internal politics or its strategic policy choices.

Scenario 5: A Lethal Military – Civilian Air Incident

In addition to military-military incidents, the increase in activity in the shared area has resulted in several cases of civilian airliners being forced to take action to avoid Russian aircraft that were flying without broadcasting their position to civilian air traffic control. In at least one instance there has been an emergency manoeuvre undertaken by the civilian pilot after establishing visual contact with a Russian aircraft. These flights by military aircraft in civilian air traffic corridors, operating without transponding their position, are ongoing. Such actions are in fact fully in accordance with international law, however the danger they represent is acute.

Should a collision take place between a Russian aircraft and a civilian airliner, the sequence of events this could set in train could conceivably end in a military clash. Following a collision in which dozens or possibly hundreds of civilians are killed, when there would be little or no doubt about Russian military's fault for the incident, Western leaders would be under a great deal of pressure to respond firmly. This response would initially be a choice between limiting air travel, at great economic cost, or limiting the entry of Russian aircraft into these international air corridors via vigorous aerial interdiction. This latter option would represent a serious challenge to the Russian administration.³⁰

Again, the issue of contested territory in the shared neighbourhood serves to exacerbate the risks. With Russian control over Crimean and Abkhazian airspace unrecognised and, in the case of the former, boycotted, by other regional actors, the movement of civilian aircraft remains complex. Ukrainian air traffic control, with the support of international organisations

28 Russian Troops In Transnistria Squeezed By Ukraine And Moldova, Eurasianet, 25 May 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/73586> Accessed March 2017

29 Будет ли в Приднестровье аэропорт?, Первый Приднестровский, 10 May 2016, <https://tv.pgtrk.ru/news/20160510/43785> Accessed March 2017

30 This scenario is expanded upon and developed in Ian Kearns, *Avoiding War in Europe: The Risks From NATO-Russian Close Military Encounters*, Arms Control Today, November 2015 https://www.armscontrol.org/ACT/2015_11/Features/Avoiding-War-in-Europe-The-Risks-from-NATO-Russian-Close-Military-Encounters

such as ICAO and EASA, has rerouted commercial flights around the peninsula.³¹ However Russia continues to operate flights to and from Crimea within a parallel ATC structure. The operation of parallel and contradictory flight management systems within the same space may well pose a risk to civilian airliners. Moreover, in the context of the scenarios described above, the risks to civilian aviation operating in a de facto war zone were made tragically evident by the 2014 downing of flight MH17.³²

31 <https://news.aviation-safety.net/2016/02/19/easa-and-russia-at-odds-over-safety-in-simferopol-fir/>

32 According to the 2016 report on preliminary results of the criminal investigation of the Joint Investigation Team, “the JIT concludes that flight MH17 was shot down on 17 July 2014 by a missile of the 9M38 series, launched by a BUK-TELAR, from farmland in the vicinity of Pervomaiskiy (or: Pervomaiskyi). At that time, the area was controlled by pro-Russian fighters. Furthermore, the investigation also shows that the BUK-TELAR was brought in from the territory of the Russian Federation and subsequently, after having shot down flight MH-17, was taken back to the Russian Federation”. <https://www.om.nl/onderwerpen/mh17-vliegramp/presentaties/presentation-joint/>

Section 3: A New Path to Crisis Avoidance and Crisis Management in the Shared Neighbourhood

It is hard to be sanguine about the current state of affairs in Russia-West relations when one considers that any and all of the scenarios just outlined are entirely plausible. As things stand, if any of them come to pass, it is highly unlikely that Russia and the West will agree on cause or necessary consequence. When a crisis erupts, both sides will most likely assume that it was deliberately initiated by the other side, and will mobilize its own resources and support friendly local forces to counter the actions of the other side and obstruct its plans.

Existing diplomatic practices and strategic mind-sets, having so far proved themselves unable to arrest the slide in relations or even to stabilise it, offer little reason to be confident that they will be used to prevent or successfully manage a further slide in relations. For much of the recent past, high-level meetings of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) have been suspended. When, more recently, meetings have taken place, they have tended to be used more for presentation of positions than for engagement in substantive diplomatic dialogue. The belief, even among many who have participated in such meetings, is that NATO and Russia talk past each other rather than with each other. The EU and Russia had not managed to agree on creating crisis-management mechanisms before the Ukraine crisis, and currently also keep their contacts at a minimal level.

While on paper the OSCE has many forums and mechanisms that could be used to help manage and resolve such situations, in practice they have so far been held hostage to the general deterioration in European security relations that has taken place. Endeavours worth pursuing, such as the modernisation of the Vienna Document, have been unable to get anywhere as a result.

The other reason why Russia and the West are unlikely to agree on cause and consequence is that, as noted earlier, the many differences between them today are not solely the result of policies pursued by any individual leader but are a product of their fundamentally different interpretations and conceptions of recent European history, world order, and developments in the shared neighbourhood. Precisely because of this, the current confrontation is not only dangerous but is likely to be long-lasting.

Thinking about the Russia-West relationship in new, or perhaps old but largely forgotten, ways is therefore now urgent.

In this final section of the paper, we set out six elements of an approach to crisis avoidance and management that might be capable of rising to the challenge that a new crisis in the shared neighbourhood would present. We acknowledge that the political and economic systems of all the common neighbourhood states are very different, and there can be no

one-size-fits-all approach to crisis management. Rather, our approach is to identify the guiding principles and main mechanisms that would need to be adopted in any individual crisis.

The elements of this new approach are: clarity on core interests; an understanding of the limited utility of force in securing crisis outcomes; the need to exercise military and diplomatic restraint; awareness of the central role of deterrence; the need for high-level political dialogue, and exploration of new diplomatic formats and initiatives. We deal with each of these in turn.³³

1. Crisis Avoidance Through Clarity on Core Interests

At its core, the art of crisis management and crisis avoidance in relations between nuclear armed states and nuclear armed alliances is about protecting one's vital interests while avoiding war. This requires each side to be very clear about what its own interests and those of its adversaries are. In the context of our specific focus in this paper on crisis avoidance and management in the shared European neighbourhood, it is our contention that the West in particular has work to do to achieve, and then communicate, greater clarity about where its own core interests lie.

The Western response to the annexation of Crimea made it evident that, while other forms of support were possible, Western military force would not be used directly to defend Ukraine. In doing so, the West implicitly stated that neither Ukraine nor any other state in the shared European neighbourhood represents an interest so fundamental that war is a price worth paying to defend it. Russia, on the other hand, has shown by its actions that it does view at least some of the shared neighbourhood as an area of core national interest and that it is willing to both fight and pay an economic price for it.

While few in the West take the Russian narrative of post-Cold War grievance, fear of encirclement and regime change that underpins this position seriously, the important point is not whether the Russian narrative is in any way justified or believable but whether it forms the world-view of the Russian leadership and therefore holds the key to understanding its behaviour. There is a strong case for believing that it is and that it does.

The question of importance to crisis avoidance is: what should these starting points on each side mean for the policies subsequently pursued?

33 For a discussion of how some elements of this framework can be applied to the Ukraine crisis, see Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Crisis Management*, *Survival*, vol.56 no.3, June-July 2014, pp 7-42.

In our view, **it would serve crisis avoidance goals well if decision makers in the West more fully accepted the strategic implications of the choices made over Crimea.** Positions that muddy the water persist, whether by calls for the West to arm Ukraine or support it militarily, or by calls for Ukraine and Georgia to be quickly welcomed into Western institutions such as the EU and NATO. This is dangerous because such calls imply a greater level of commitment to the neighbourhood countries than really exists. They also underestimate how important the region is to Russia.

If Western policy-makers decide to contest, or to imply that they are willing to contest, the shared neighbourhood with Russia by force when in reality they have no intention of doing so, they will run the serious risk of provoking a war, or a crisis that takes us to the brink of war, in which the West then either loses cohesion under pressure or backs down because its own core interests are insufficiently at stake.

That the West would back down seems likely because - while the countries concerned and their peoples have every right to aspire to membership of Western institutions - the fact is that many of the existing members of NATO and the EU, and their peoples, would not support such an assertive policy. Voters in the Netherlands, to give the most recent example, forced the EU to clarify that its Association Agreement with Ukraine involved no commitment to future membership and no offer of security guarantees.

Being privately clear that the shared neighbourhood is not an area of core Western interest that would be defended by military force should provide the starting point for building Western policy. This is already the de facto position in the majority of EU and NATO capitals. But even in these capitals the policy implications have yet to be thought through.

Yet, if the West builds policy on even a private acknowledgement that it will not contest the common neighbourhood militarily, there is immediately the problem to be managed of Russia taking this acknowledgment as a green light to assert its authority in what it then sees as a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

Being clear about core Western interests in relation to the shared neighbourhood does not mean that the West has no interests in the region at all, still less an acknowledgement of a Russian sphere of influence. On the contrary, the emergence of a stable and well-governed 'ring of friends' with close political, social, and economic ties to the EU and NATO, sharing Western values and wishing to follow its development model, clearly remains in the interest of the West, as does the discouragement of Russian use of force that has been so damaging to West-Russia relations and European security. There are also tangible Western economic interests in the area, including those related to its importance as transit route for energy and goods from Asia. In that sense, the West has obvious preferences regarding the shared neighbourhood not becoming Russia-controlled. Importantly, some of the countries

in the region themselves clearly voice their preference for the Western 'vision', despite its weaknesses, over a Russian one.

While the West will not use force to defend these interests militarily, they are considered important enough to direct significant asymmetrical Western attention to the region. The West has explicitly rejected Russia's use of force and has refused to acknowledge spheres of influence. It has increased the price that Russia has to pay for using force through economic sanctions. The EU and other Western actors have also increased the provision of aid, training and governance support to the countries concerned.

There is thus a de facto and in our view unavoidable sub-military strategic competition for principles and influence in the common neighbourhood. This too carries risks of misunderstanding and crisis escalation. But these risks will be less if Western decision makers are intent on not taking the competition to military levels, and if Russia understands both that this is the case and that there are nevertheless expensive non-military costs to its interests whenever it does take the competition to the military level.

We would go further and argue that, although the specifics will vary according to country and Russian perceptions, some forms of Western engagement are likely to be more stabilizing and less prone to West-Russia crisis than others. Proper treatment of the subject would require significant additional research. Nevertheless, in the meantime, the EU and other Western actors should focus their policy on helping the countries of the region to become fully sovereign, democratic, economically viable member states of the international community. It is this, rather than membership in Western institutions or creating illusions of military assistance during a crisis, that ought to be the goal.

2. Recognizing Limits to the Utility of Force

In the scenarios outlined above, use of deadly force would have limited utility in dictating the final outcome. While it could provide tactical advantages for particular players, it would ultimately not resolve any of the crises. Instead, it would aggravate them, deepen the West-Russia crisis and increase the probability of a direct confrontation. These five scenarios also show that 'tailored' or limited use of force, as well as actions through proxies, may easily escalate out of control, and also that incidents, accidents or unauthorised actions may lead to quick escalation of a crisis.

All of that increases the urgency of re-thinking the utility of the use of force, especially by Russia. At the time of writing, President Putin is basking in what he believes is a strategic success in Syria built on the back of Russian military power. Experience in eastern Ukraine however, tells a different story. Russia was not able to mobilise sufficient pro-Russian sentiment in that region and had to take the risk of deploying regular Russian military

units to ensure some parts of the country remained outside of Kiev's writ. This has been expensive, not least because of the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy. Were the Russians to attempt any kind of expansion of their footprint in Ukraine in future it is highly likely that sanctions would be strengthened and that such moves would meet fierce resistance from the Ukrainian government and population. This would tie large parts of the Russian military down for a long period at huge cost both to the Russian economy and, over time, potentially to the legitimacy of the regime in Moscow. This would be true of even one such operation, let alone any Russian effort to impose its will across several countries in the region at once.

While the West may need to be clearer about where its own core interests lie to ensure crisis avoidance, **it is equally the case that the Russian leadership needs to develop a more acute understanding of the limited utility of force when it comes to dictating crisis outcomes.** If it does not do this, it could over-extend itself and create the kind of domestic crisis in Russia that has to be managed by harsher rhetoric and action against Western actors. That in turn, could lead to a further escalation in the Russia-West confrontation, rather than to the avoidance of such escalation. This message should be transmitted to the Russian leadership, diplomats and military officials in all meeting with their Western counterparts.

3. Exercise of military and diplomatic restraint

Another important feature of crisis management that both Russia and the West need to re-learn is the value of restraint.

As we pointed out in section 2 of this paper, some of the potential flash-points in the Russia-West relationship in Eastern Europe could spark into life as the result of actions taken by relatively minor actors on the ground. Such is the level of mistrust in the Russia-West relationship today, however, that that is unlikely to be believed as the cause by either side. Attribution of intent to Moscow, Washington or other Western capitals is almost certain, which is why such incidents have the potential to escalate to a higher level. **It is therefore vital that both sides use all of their political, economic and diplomatic influence on actors in the region to ensure they act with maximum restraint.**

Restraint has a military dimension too. As we noted again earlier in this paper, there are too many close military encounters occurring in the Euro-Atlantic area between Russia and the militaries of NATO member states or those of NATO partner countries in the region. These incidents are so dangerous because they rest the avoidance of a dangerous incident so firmly on the judgements of individual pilots and officers operating in close proximity to one another. Crisis avoidance in this context requires restraint to be communicated as the default option and standard operating procedure through all levels of the military chain of

command on all sides. Effective crisis avoidance and indeed, crisis management, requires political leaders to shape military behaviour in crisis or pre-crisis situations, not be driven by it.

4. Deterrence as Crisis Avoidance

Increased clarity on the kind of strategy that Western interests in the shared neighbourhood can and cannot bear will only work to avoid war while protecting Western interests if this clarity is matched by **a clear commitment to deterrence in areas that are a core Western interest**. Without this there is a danger that the Russian leadership may miscalculate as to the point on the map at which core Western interests do come into play.

Crisis avoidance requires the West to be absolutely clear about the sacrosanct nature of NATO territory and to be unequivocal about the nature of the response Russia would face if it made any moves on a NATO member state. Recent decisions taken at the Wales and Warsaw Summits of NATO leaders are to be welcomed in this regard and it is important that the decisions taken are seen to be followed up on developing military plans, backed by a credible set of NATO forces and capabilities, as well as exercises, for countering any Russian offensive actions.

However, deterrence messaging needs to go beyond the traditional clarity on how the Alliance would deal with a major conventional and or nuclear state-on- state attack. Given the now clear pattern of Russian use of hybrid tactics, clear deterrence messages need to be extended to the use of ‘little green men’ and major cyber-attacks on NATO territory and targets. This means being clear, for example, that should little green men or ‘insurgents’ appear to destabilise one of the Baltic States, NATO’s working assumption right from the start would be that the Russian leadership is responsible and would therefore be held accountable. Similarly, the working assumption about any major and sophisticated cyber-attacks resulting in significant physical damage to NATO countries infrastructure and casualties, would be that they are state-sponsored.³⁴

The additional benefit of being clear with Russia in advance that, e.g. “little green men incidents” will be laid at its door is to ensure that it exerts maximum control over its allies, partners and proxies, be they government, the nominal leadership of unrecognised statelets or irregular militias operational in the shared neighbourhood.

34 Granted, Russia may want to similarly elaborate on its deterrence posture by declaring that it would assume responsibility of Western leaders for emergence of any anti-regime ‘insurgencies’ inside Russia.

5. High-Level Political Dialogue

The measures outlined so far could all add stability to the current situation and buy time for more dialogue on the key points of difference between Russia and the West. None of the changes we have suggested, however, are a replacement for high-level political dialogue.

Many, particularly in Eastern Europe, have resisted this, fearing that it might lead to business as usual with a Russia that is aggressive toward its neighbours. There are concerns that President Trump may strike a deal with Russia that effectively recognises a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and perhaps agree to limits on NATO exercises and deployments in the Baltic region, leaving the countries there vulnerable. The big political concern is also that a US-Russia deal over the heads of the Europeans will return Europe to an age where the major powers do what they will and the smaller states in Europe do as they must.

All of these fears are understandable. But we are living through a period of crisis in relations between a nuclear armed state and a nuclear armed alliance and the current lack of dialogue is contributing to the crisis and making it more dangerous.

Moreover, the Western position that Russia must put itself back within the bounds of international law before real dialogue can commence may be rhetorically neat, but it is not realistic.

There is no doubt that the annexation of Crimea was an illegal land-grab, carried out in the most irresponsible and illegitimate way and that it deserved to be condemned. It should not be recognised internationally and Western organisations should engage in no economic activity related to Crimea. Even if economic sanctions imposed in relation to Russian activity in eastern Ukraine are lifted at some stage, those imposed in response to the Russian occupation of Crimea should remain in place indefinitely.

It should be understood that Russia is not part of the Euro-Atlantic security order that today encompasses most of Western, central and eastern Europe and that was embedded in the Helsinki Principles and Paris Charter. Instead, by dint of its geographical position, relative power and actions, it exists in relation and opposition to it. That should be however an argument for political dialogue, not against it.

Just like the practice of US-Soviet summitry during the Cold War, high-level political dialogue should be approached today through the lens of confrontation management.

Viewed through this lens, a high-level political dialogue is needed not to transcend the deep rooted difference between the two or to explicitly agree on spheres of influence but to ensure that leaders on both sides have an accurate reading of how the other side sees its

core interests and is likely to behave in any given set of circumstances. Such dialogue could also help to formalise and legitimise the mutual pursuit of some of the other crisis avoidance measures tabled in this paper.

If dialogue one day leads from confrontation management to a new understanding and to a transformation of the Russia - West relationship that is all to the good. In the meantime, an emphasis on dialogue as one element of a strategy to do all we can to survive until that day, and to help deliver the other measures outlined in this paper, would be sensible.

6. New Diplomatic Initiatives

Our analysis leads us to believe that stabilising the situation requires some diplomatic flexibility and innovation. Some will be sceptical of this approach. There has always been a debate about whether institutional innovations can and should be part of the solution or whether, if the political will existed to cooperate in the first place, such innovations would be necessary. However, in our view dialogue of all kinds is more, not less, necessary when a relationship is in trouble and that is as true in the Russia-West relationship as in any other. Changes that seek to facilitate such dialogue are therefore potentially valuable.

Our belief is also partly underpinned by earlier European Leadership Network work on trust-building that suggests that increased personal contacts between diplomats and military figures across this divide can build personal relationships and trust which in turn can help to move relations between states in a more positive direction, even from an inauspicious start.

Given that current diplomatic instruments and practices have so far proved insufficient, we believe a number of specific diplomatic initiatives could now be worth pursuing. These include:

- **Broadening the agenda of NRC meetings and increasing the frequency of such meetings.** The resumption of Ambassadorial level NATO-Russia Council meetings following the pause in 2014 and early 2015 must be viewed as a positive development. The shuttering of a mechanism designed to facilitate dialogue and air grievances at such a time of crisis was a grave error. The resumption of meetings, although not the cooperative competencies of the Council, have served a practical purpose of confrontation management. On example is the follow-up work done on Finnish President Niinistö's initiative on military-civilian aerial incidents.³⁵ A more ambitious agenda

35 See Press statements and answers to journalists' questions following Russian-Finnish talks, President of Russia, 1 July 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/52312> Accessed January 2017; Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, NATO, 13 July 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_134102.htm Accessed January 2017

would see the creation of an ad-hoc Military Crisis Management Group consisting of military officials from NATO countries and Russia, tasked with facilitating information exchange, implementing transparency and confidence-building measures, and working on procedures to avoid incidents.³⁶

- **Additional use of the available OSCE mechanisms.** Whilst much has been made of Russia's bypassing of the spirit, if not the letter, of the Vienna Document, little has been made of the failure to look into the full implementation of other OSCE initiatives. These include the escalation management mechanisms of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre and the Forum for Security Cooperation. That said, there remains much to be improved and clarified in the Vienna Document and this should be pursued. Modifications have thus far been suggested for the Mechanism for Consultation and Cooperation as Regards Unusual Military Activities and Cooperation as Regards Hazardous Incidents of a Military Nature, but the Vienna Document in its fullest sense offers the best avenue for addressing the wider set of military challenges being faced.
- **Setting up EU - Russia crises management mechanism.** In some of the crises described in section 2, the European Union would play more important role than NATO. In recent years, the EU has demonstrated that it had at its disposal instruments to affect crisis outcomes in the Eastern Europe, both by offering incentives (such as prospects for closer relationship with the EU, financial and other assistance) and by applying punitive measures (such as sanctions). The EU has evolved significantly from a technocratic to a political actor in the region, therefore the lack of EU-Russia crisis management contacts creates a dangerous vacuum. Establishing a dedicated EU-Russia mechanism of consultations on security issues could contribute to crisis avoidance and crisis management, as well as provide an opportunity for addressing diverging narratives on shared neighbourhood outlined in section 1.
- The proactive use of the **contact group approach** on possible flash-point issues. A defining feature of the current confrontation is the failure of institutional dialogue and conflict management mechanisms. These instruments, such as the OSCE, NATO-Russia Council, or the UN Security Council, have proven inert and overly inhibited by consensus decision making and veto. In their stead the ad-hoc, issue-specific contact group format has proven a more effective model. The convening of the 'Normandy Four' grouping on the conflict in Ukraine (inclusive of Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia) served to keep open a Russia-West dialogue channel while others were being restricted, allowing the participants to discuss in greater detail the Eastern Ukraine

36 Ensuring Euro-Atlantic Security, Des Browne, Wolfgang Ischinger, Sam Nunn & Igor Ivanov, European Leadership Network, 17 February 2017, http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/ensuring-euro-atlantic-security_4469.html

ceasefire agreement. Whilst the contact group format has had notable failings, in particular the inability to bring a halt to the fighting that erupted around Debaltseve in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Minsk II agreement, we believe that the use of contact group diplomacy, especially in a pre-emptive capacity, has a role to play in Russia-West crisis management. Through identifying areas that have the potential to worsen relations in the foreseeable future, for example using the scenarios suggested in Section 2, Western states and Russia can aim to establish issue-specific contact groups in an effort to address areas of disagreement and avoid escalation. Former officials and diplomats, sanctioned by their perspective governments, can form such contact groups for discreet and open exchanges of views and ideas.

Conclusion

The shared neighbourhood area between Russia and NATO/EU is likely to continue to be a source of tension. The two sides approach the area with different and often competing interests and interpretations about its past, present and future. Far from being passive subjects of great power politics, the states and societies of the shared neighbourhood have their own aspirations and their own agendas, which cannot be brushed aside easily. Finally, in a period of tension and increased uncertainty, one cannot discount the danger that an incident, accident or local crisis may escalate into full-fledged confrontation.

This report presented possible scenarios of negative developments in the joint neighbourhood that may end up with the West and Russia facing each other directly in a bitter standoff. Instead of hoping that such a crisis can be avoided, or assuming that it can be managed through a mix of existing tools and ad-hoc improvisation, we suggest that there should be a conscious effort from all sides to put in place elements of a crisis avoidance and crisis management system, beginning with more honest discussion about our core interests, the risks of escalation, and about the dangers of the use of force.

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The European Leadership Network (ELN) works to advance the idea of a cooperative and cohesive Europe and to develop collaborative European capacity to address the pressing foreign, defence and security policy challenges of our time. It does this through its active network of former and emerging European political, military, and diplomatic leaders, through its high-quality research, publications and events, and through its institutional partnerships across Europe, North America, Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region. It focuses on arms control and political/military issues, including both conventional and nuclear disarmament challenges inside Europe, and has a particular interest in policy challenges arising in both the eastern and southern peripheries of the continent.

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