

West Could Sleepwalk into a “Doomsday War with Russia” - It’s Time to Wake Up

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Since the [Ukraine crisis](#) exploded into civil conflict and war in 2013, we have known that we live in troubled times. It has become increasingly clear that the peace order in Europe, established at the end of the Cold War in 1989, is unstable. The arrangements made at that time appear to have generated more conflicts than they were able to resolve.

While the European Union claimed at certain points to be a peace project – and internally it has achieved much in that respect – all around the borders of the proposed “[ring of friends](#)”, as the then president of the European Commission Romano Prodi put it in 2002, it is an “arc of fire”. In North Africa, states have collapsed and the whole region is challenged once again to find an appropriate balance between security and democracy. The Middle East is the focus of several proxy wars piled upon each other in multiple layers.



Russian troops march through Moscow to mark Victory Day. PA/Alexander Zemlianichenko

Since [Russia’s military intervention](#) in Syria at the end of September 2015, one of the most salient conflicts has been the struggle between [Russia and the US](#) for the right to decide who would have priority in deciding Syria’s fate. This is just one of the issues over which an armed confrontation could take place. In fact, there are so many potential tripwires that it is impossible to predict which precisely could set off a chain of events that could escalate into outright military confrontation.

Escalation and militarisation

On the one side, the US-led NATO build-up on land, sea and air around Russia’s borders, accompanied by the activation in May 2016 of missile defence installations in the region, is perceived as a threat to the very existence of Russia as a sovereign state.

Moscow views the US [Aegis Ashore system](#) installed in [Romania](#) as having the potential to negate its nuclear deterrence capability. Intermediate-range cruise missiles are banned by the [1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#), yet appear to be creeping in through the back door. Advanced American warships now demonstratively exercise just a few dozen kilometres from Russian bases in the [Baltic and Black seas](#).

Russia sees much of this as a direct threat to its own security, and threatens to deploy nuclear-capable missiles to [Kaliningrad and even possibly Crimea](#). The Russian armed forces are just about to test the prototypes of the [S-500 Prometei](#) air and missile defence system (also known as the 55R6M Triumfator M), capable of destroying ICBMs (intercontinental

ballistic missiles), hypersonic cruise missiles and planes at over Mach 5 speeds. The weakening or even abrogation of the INF and [START treaties](#) could destroy decades of painstaking arms control negotiations.

On the other side, some defence analysts argue that the post-Cold War settlement is already destroyed, above all by Russia's actions in Ukraine. The former deputy commander of NATO and British general Sir Alexander Richard Shirreff, in his book 2017: War with Russia, makes no bones about the [imminent danger of war](#).

He predicts that to escape what it believes to be encirclement by NATO, Russia will try to seize territory in Eastern Ukraine to open up a land corridor to Crimea and invade the Baltic states. These Strangelovian fantasies have a long pedigree in NATO thinking. When the events in Ukraine began to spiral out of control in early 2014, the head of NATO forces in Europe, [General Philip Breedlove](#), became quite an expert in predicting various Russian invasions, [prompting particular concern in Germany](#).

The Atlantic security community is in danger of sleepwalking into war. The very talk of such a conflict "normalises" the possibility. [A BBC2 film](#) aired in February 2016 acted out the scenario of a Russian attack on Latvia escalating into a nuclear exchange. The Obama administration is pressuring Germany to deploy a German contingent to [bolster NATO's presence on Russia's borders](#). Few in Russia forget the devastating consequences the [last time this happened in 1941](#).

Back from the brink

While Atlantic defence commentators talk of Vladimir Putin's "increasingly aggressive behaviour" and have made the phrase "[Russian aggression](#)" part of the [standard language](#), few have stopped to think what created such a dangerous situation in the first place.



Tu-95 strategic bomber. [PA/Alexander Zemlianichenko](#)

As the Chinese have repeatedly noted, the Ukraine crisis did not come from nowhere. The slogan of the NATO defence ministers' meeting in [Brussels in mid-May](#) was "deter and dialogue", but in the event the emphasis was more on the former than the latter. The [Warsaw NATO summit in July 2016](#) is likely to confirm that "Russian aggression", [Iranian adventurism](#), [Chinese land reclamation](#) and [Middle Eastern instability](#) pose a threat to the US and its allies.

Instead of piling more fuel on a fire that is already in danger of getting out of control, it would be wiser to start a diplomatic process. NATO insists that there can be no "business as usual" until the [Minsk commitments](#) are fully implemented, yet some of the most important provisions are up to [Ukraine to fulfil](#). So Russia, and with it the peace of Europe, is held hostage by some radicals in Ukraine who block any moves towards [elections in the Donbass](#) and the stipulated decentralising constitutional reforms.

Shirreff admits in his book that Russia is increasingly worried about the spread of NATO bases around its borders, yet advocates yet more of the same. Russia is a continental-sized great power armed with the world's [largest arsenal](#) of nuclear weapons. The ambition to achieve Western military superiority is simply unattainable.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 28 2015 Putin [asked of the West](#),

surveying years of failed military interventions that have devastated countries and destabilised whole regions: "Do you realise now what you have done?" Russia is undoubtedly a difficult partner, but on some of the most pressing global issues of our time, including Syria, the Russian analysis has been correct.

The deal offered in 2012 whereby Syrian president Bashar al-Assad would go but the secular regime in Damascus would stay was peremptorily dismissed by the West, assuming that Assad would soon fall and the "moderates" triumph. The result was years of civil war that has now spilled over into a refugee crisis that threatens Europe in its entirety.

Catastrophe

It is pointless to speculate what a war between Russia and the Atlantic community would look like, or even how it would start. This really would be a war to end all wars, since there would be no one left to fight another war. The emphasis now must be on averting such a doomsday scenario, and for that there must be honest recognition of earlier mistakes by all sides, and the beginning a new and more substantive process of engagement.

The endless prolongation of sanctions and a rhetoric of violence and scapegoating creates an atmosphere where a small incident could easily spiral out of control. It is the responsibility of our generation to ensure that it never happens.

For an alternative view, click [here](#).

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