



Fatal Choices: The impact of increased military resources on security and stability in Europe

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1. Summary

The defence planning choices that NATO countries and Russia have made have led to significant divergence in their military capabilities. In contrast to the Cold War, when forces stationed in Europe were (broadly speaking) symmetrical, there are now said to be important asymmetries in force postures.

These asymmetries, combined with different approaches to future defence planning, could create security risks if they contain in-built elements that stimulate an action-reaction dynamic. The risks may be magnified in crisis conditions, and over time they may become acute if the current absence of strategic stability talks and military-to-military dialogue reduce the capacity of (first and foremost) NATO and Russia to assess military behaviour accurately in a timely manner.

Military spending is an input measure, and recent decisions to increase budgets will provide states with new resources, and require choices to be made about how they are to be used to generate new or modified capabilities.

New capabilities may, in theory, either exacerbate the risks created by military asymmetries, or they may help to reduce them. The European system of arms control, confidence- and security-building and transparency measures was intended to ensure that military capabilities were constructed in ways that reduce security risk. However, that system was created in different conditions, and it is now under extreme pressure. The extent to which the system created in the past will be able to address the problems arising in the future is an open question.

- How accurate are recent reports on asymmetries in force postures?
- Do identified asymmetries pose security risk, especially in a crisis?
- What choices are states making about how to use the resources becoming available to them in their defence planning?
- Are the defence planning choices being made are likely to alleviate or exacerbate identified security risks?

If it is agreed that these are valid questions, the original purpose of arms control in Europe—to work in combination with defence and deterrence to promote security—may once again become an important focus in the coming years.

2. Recent developments in the strategic environment in Europe

Increasing military resources

The recent data for certain key indicators of military effort suggest that there is a trend emerging of increasing investment. This is true both internationally, and in the Euro-Atlantic area.

The data SIPRI produces on military spending indicate a rise in total world military expenditure to \$1686 billion in 2016, an increase of 0.4 per cent in real terms from 2015. Developments in the Euro-Atlantic area contributed significantly to the overall tendency. Military spending in North America saw its first annual increase since 2010, while spending grew in all parts of Europe. In the western part of Europe, spending grew for the second consecutive year.¹ While this change in western Europe is a new development, spending also continued to rise in eastern Europe—a more long-term tendency. Russia is one of only two countries in the world where military spending has risen in real terms in each of the past 20 years—China is the other.

According to the data produced by SIPRI, the volume of international transfers of major weapons has grown continuously since 2004, with an acceleration in the rate of increased after roughly 2008. Until very recently this tendency was driven first and foremost by developments in Asia and the Middle East, and the share of European countries as consumers of foreign major weapons systems was decreasing within the overall world total. However, this trend has been broken more recently, and states in western Europe are beginning to receive larger numbers of advanced combat aircraft, armed with weapons of significant range and precision. Further deliveries under existing contracts will continue to drive European import volumes up in the coming years, while the growth in military spending might lead to new agreements.

Russia, meanwhile, is more than half way through the period for implementation of a State Armament Programme 2011–2020 that contained ambitious objectives to modernize equipment in the inventory of the armed forces across the spectrum of nuclear and general purpose forces. Nuclear-armed countries that are members of NATO are also in the process of modernizing their forces.

Asymmetries in force posture and doctrine

In a recent assessment of trends in European force posture, the Polish Institute for International Affairs concludes that Russia has consistently modernized its armed forces in ways that emphasize high-intensity combat in the OSCE area, but countries in Western Europe have not.²

The data presented by PISM suggest a broad numerical equivalence between Russian forces and the combined forces of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the forces allocated to United States European Command. However, according to the PISM assessment, Russia has made different choices about the kinds of capability and forces to build. Russia has emphasized heavy and medium lift capabilities to facilitate the rapid movement of significant numbers of forces, as well as the combination of advanced air defences and advanced stand-off weapons that provide an effective so-called anti-access/area denial capability.

Investment choices will be driven first and foremost by national assessments of need, in combination with the effects of the NATO Defence Planning Process for those countries that participate in the Alliance. Allies have emphasized the acquisition of

¹ The comprehensive annual update of the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database is accessible from today at www.sipri.org

² *Trends in Force Posture in Europe*, PISM Strategic File no. 1 (85), 6 June 2017.

highly advanced systems that, for reasons of cost, are only possible to buy in small quantities. The decisions taken at successive NATO Summits in Wales and Warsaw have led to the creation of a small rapid-reaction capability considered sufficient to assist Allies facing a limited action intended to probe readiness and test resolve, as well as a somewhat larger “trip-wire” force deployed in Allied states considered to be more vulnerable in that they would be unable to repel more significant attacks on territory using their own resources should they occur.

The emphasis in NATO planning is now being placed on how to mobilize the follow-on forces needed in case the “trip-wire” is activated. The process of fully developing the follow-on forces, along with the procedures and capabilities to move them to where they might be needed, are still in development. In a recent report the European Leadership Network points to the need for NATO to focus on resuscitating the military science of reinforcement, generating follow-on forces and creating the physical and organisational infrastructure to facilitate both.³

These patterns carry a potential risk of crisis instability. If a large-scale movement of Russian forces at short notice triggered a NATO response, based on mobilizing and beginning to move reinforcements to forward-deployed units, and that in turn led Russia to use its anti-access/area denial capabilities, an extremely dangerous crisis would follow. If NATO and Russia respectively no longer understand the signalling of intent by an adversary clearly, the current absence of established channels for communication could make a bad situation worse.

3. Old concepts re-emerging

In the years between roughly 1990–2005, European states walked back from the grotesque levels of military effort sustained during the Cold War. Increased investments in the military will require new decisions by states about how to use the new resources at their disposal. Could these developments be characterized as a “new arms race”?

It must be recognized that a wide gap has opened up between the principal documents that states have signed in the field of politico-military security and their actions on the ground. Documents that were developed in the cooperative security environment of the 1990s and early 2000s have rarely been openly repudiated, but the language and behavior of states has become progressively more “realist” in tone and content, with a strengthened emphasis on politico-military factors in security discourse.

One traditional characteristic of arms race theory has perhaps begun to reassert itself: the contest over whether stability will be enhanced when defences have the advantage over offensive forces. In the 1980s and 1990s, advocates of “offensive defence” and “defensive defence” engaged each other with contrary lines of argument.

As noted above, increases in military spending can be expected to continue, and in the near term, it can be predicted that the priority will be given to buying capabilities that are available “off the shelf” as states try to increase their national military capabilities and plug identified “gaps” in relative short order. In addition, the full exploitation of the “networking” of forces that has been a hallmark of recent development can be anticipated.

³ Lukasz Kulesa and Thomas Frear, *NATO’s Evolving Modern Deterrence Posture: Challenges and Risks*, ELN Issue Brief: Deterrence, May 2017.

If one looks at the process now being undertaken in NATO as part of its process of adaptation, however, the political guidance on the types of military operations the Alliance may be called on to undertake is linked to an assessment of the forces needed for the kinds of operations that might be undertaken over a 15-year perspective.

In the longer perspective, the first stages of introducing capabilities based on new technologies of various kinds can be envisaged, alongside the systems we are already familiar with (in the same way that armed forces today rely on the network-centric capabilities that were in the early stages of deployment in the early 1990s). However, states are not equal in terms of their access to the latest developments in (for example) robotics, artificial intelligence, life sciences and human enhancement, or material science. This reflects another strand of thinking in arms race theory—the potential for disruptive technologies to promote asymmetric responses, and the impact of that technology dynamic on strategic stability.

The pace of technology change, and its uncertain implications for defence and security, complicate assessment of another characteristic of “classical” arms race theory: how to identify a meaningful “finish line”—that is, at what point would escalating levels of armament reach equilibrium?

4. Looking ahead

The system of conventional arms control and confidence- and security-building measures created in Europe should still be a key element in ensuring European security. The ongoing efforts to maintain and strengthen the existing system remain an important priority. However, it is not too soon to begin looking forward at how to adapt and continue to develop the system in line with important changes in technology and the politico-military environment.

In 2017, we probably do not yet see all of the patterns of behaviour normally associated with classical arms race theory. This is perhaps because levels of military effort are still (relative to the past) at a fairly low level, but we can see tendencies that could take us in the direction of a contemporary form of arms racing—one that is both unpredictable given the pace of technology change, and that might accelerate if the recent increases in military spending are sustained. The main safeguard against that future seems to be the potential economic difficulty of sustaining levels of investment, and not agreement among states on a common approach to security and defence.

Partly because the direction of military development is not yet set firmly in place, the conditions probably do not exist today for detailed discussion of control measures. It is not realistic to expect European countries to interrupt the plans that they have only recently put in place to redress what they identify as shortcomings in their defence and deterrence capabilities. However, it is time for a serious dialogue on the direction in which states in the Eurasian region are moving in their military policies and planning, and the possible implications of the choices being made.