Russia's myths about NATO
Moscow's propaganda ahead of the NATO Summit

by Karl-Heinz Kamp

In view of the continuing severe criticism of the aggression against Ukraine and with an eye to the decisions due to be taken by NATO in Warsaw, Russia is expected to adopt an even harsher tone towards the Alliance. As Moscow has quite clearly underestimated the unity of the Atlantic Alliance (and also of the EU), Russia's propaganda narrative mainly aims at justifying its policy of annexation and at delegitimising NATO as a whole. It is time for a fact-based counter statement.

The accusations Russia has made against NATO have become significantly sharper since Moscow's apparent policy change in 2014. The injustice done in Crimea, for example, is counterbalanced by the injustice allegedly done by NATO in Kosovo. Furthermore, the accusations range from a general claim that NATO is adding fuel to the fire to specific charges concerning decisions taken by the Alliance. As the arguments largely target the public in the NATO member states, it is time for a fact-based counter statement.

The allegation that international law was breached in Kosovo

When confronted with its own undeniable breach of international law and violation of international agreements in Ukraine, Moscow regularly alludes to the Kosovo conflict. It claims that NATO intervened there militarily in 1999 without a UN Security Council mandate and hence also breached international law.

Apart from the dubious logics of counterbalancing a breach of law with another (would-be) breach of law, this argument withholds a number of facts. The Kosovo crisis was preceded by a humanitarian disaster in the Balkans, as around 100,000 people died in the civil war accompanying the break-up of Yugoslavia. According to United Nations figures, some 2,000 people fell victim to the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo in 1998 alone. Consequently, the UN Security Council stated in Resolutions 1199 (23 September 1998) and 1203 (24 October 1998) that a threat was posed to international peace. NATO intervened in this situation without a mandate – not least because Russia and China opposed any humanitarian intervention.

None of these circumstances existed in Ukraine. *Before* Russia intervened, there had been neither ethnic cleansing in Crimea nor deaths among the ethnic Russians living there. *Since* the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-backed use of force in East Ukraine, 9,330 people have died so far (April 2016) according to the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Tayé-Brook Zerihoun.

It also bears mentioning that the International Court of Justice found in June 2010 that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not breach international law. In contrast, an overwhelming majority of the delegates at the UN General Assembly voted on 27 May 2014 in favour of a resolution declaring the referendum in Crimea promoted by Russia invalid and demanding Ukraine's territorial integrity. Besides Russia, only 10 of the 194 UN member states voted against it, among them North Korea, Cuba, Syria and Belarus.

The allegation that NATO is adding fuel to the fire

The efforts NATO made immediately after Russia's aggression in Ukraine to reinsure the Allies and to deter potential adversaries were instantly branded by Moscow as having an escalating effect. The Kremlin stated that all military measures had to be waived in order to avoid a further escalation of the conflict – a stance that also found its way into German talk show debates.

The fact that military measures taken by one party to ensure its own security – whether it be the stationing of troops, military exercises or defence plans – can be wrongly seen as offensive steps and hence as a threat by the other is part of the inextricable contradictions in security policy. Entire libraries have been filled with treatises on this so-called security dilemma since the days of the Cold War. At the same time, however, preparing for possible threats, planning for all conceivable possibilities, and training for emergencies constitute the essential tasks of armed forces. This is the only way they can accomplish the tasks of protecting their country's own territory and preventing a potential adversary from perpetrating an act of military aggression.

Nothing other than this is meant by deterrence – a term frequently frowned upon by the public or difficult to communicate. The aim of having a visible and credible defence capability is to force a potential adversary to conduct a risk-benefit assessment. A potential adversary who calculates rationally will recognise that he cannot hope to gain any benefit from an attack and reject this option – and the aim of deterrence has been achieved. NATO armed forces in the territories of Eastern European NATO member states are therefore no means for waging war, but primarily a means for preventing it. If NATO complied with Russia's demand to waive preparations for defence, its end as a defence alliance would be sealed in the eyes of its East European member states at least.

The allegation that NATO is illegally stationing troops in Eastern Europe

In modification of the general accusation of escalation, the very military reinforcements decided on at the NATO Summit in Wales are criticised as being illegal. The Alliance allegedly gave its word under the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act not to station any troops in the new member states in Eastern Europe. This word is claimed to be broken repeatedly – especially since NATO is going to decide in Warsaw to deploy further troops to Eastern Europe.

However, this depiction is only half the story. The truth is that NATO declared in 1997 that it would not base any nuclear weapons in the territories of those member states who had become allies since the end of the Cold War. On the subject of conventional armed forces, the NATO-Russia Founding Act states that "...*in the current and foreseeable security environment*" NATO will carry out its collective defence by ensuring more efficiency "*rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces*". The question of what was actually meant by "substantial" and "permanent" was left unanswered when the act was signed. Top-level NATO military personnel travelled to Moscow in 1997 to discuss precisely these points. They indicated to their military counterparts in Moscow that NATO would consider temporarily stationing forces of up to division size for a maximum of three months in the territory of each of the three candidates for accession (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic) in a crisis. The Russian general staff did not object to this statement at the time.

The numbers of troops NATO today plans to station in Eastern Europe are merely a fraction of what had been hinted at in 1997. NATO is also keeping the word it gave not to deploy nuclear weapons to Eastern Europe, even though the security environment has changed fundamentally since 2014 and Russia is openly threatening Poland, Sweden and Denmark with nuclear strikes.

The allegation that NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe are heightening tensions

In addition to the stationing of troops, it is in particular the NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe that are denounced by Russia as aggressive and as measures that will further fuel the conflict. Military exercises and manoeuvres are a means of regularly verifying the readiness, mobility or efficiency of armed forces. They may also serve to either indicate a willingness to take defensive action, or to intimidate neighbours and veil offensive military operations. In this regard. the size and focus of an exercise are highly important.

Since 2013, Russia has conducted six large-scale military exercises involving between 65,000 and over 160,000 soldiers, including the annual Zapad ("West") manoeuvre. In the 2009 Zapad exercise, Russia for the first time simulated the use of nuclear weapons against Warsaw. A large-scale exercise involving 150,000 soldiers and declared an anti-terror manoeuvre began in late February 2014. Many of the units in-volved in it were deployed close to the border with Ukraine – just at the time of the annexation of Crimea and later the intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Russia is concurrently conducting so-called snap exercises in which large numbers of armed forces are mobilised virtually overnight. In early December 2014, around 9,000 soldiers, 55 combatant vessels, 250 tanks and 100 artillery pieces were rendered ready for battle in Kaliningrad in a matter of just a few days.

In comparison, the largest NATO exercise in 2013 involved only some 6,500 troops. In the same year, indi-vidual NATO nations also conducted multinational exercises, the largest of which (Cold Response, Norway) involved around 16,000 soldiers. In 2014, NATO carried out its largest exercise, involving 25,000 troops, in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine – but that is still only a fraction of Russia's manoeuvre strengths.

The allegation that NATO's aggressiveness can be seen from its expansion eastwards

One of the accusations that have been put forward by Moscow for many years with varying intensity is that NATO is increasingly expanding eastwards, to the detriment of Russia's interests. Even now, at a time of crisis, NATO is alleged to be adhering to this aggressive approach by admitting Montenegro.

Apart from NATO taking account of Moscow's concerns in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and – es-pecially out of consideration for Russia – deliberately desisting from a fast track procedure to integrate states such as Georgia or Ukraine as far back as in 2008, the criticism of expansion disregards a central as-pect. More than 40 years ago, on 1 August 1975, the Soviet Union signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki, which lays down that every sovereign state has the right *"...to belong or not to belong to international organizations, ... including the right to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance"*. Since then, the principle of a state being able to freely choose whether to join an alliance has become a cornerstone of the European political order. Viewed from this angle, the an-nouncement by Dmitri Peskov, the spokesman for President Putin, that Russia had to react to Montene-gro's NATO membership with countermeasures is downright bizarre.

In addition to geostrategic concerns, another reason for the criticism of expansion is subliminal frustration about the fact that NATO still exists two and a half decades after the end of the Cold War, while the War-saw Pact has long become a thing of the past. Clearly, it is hard for Russia to accept the simple truth that NATO still exists because 28 sovereign member states want it to.

The allegation that NATO promised not to expand

A variation on the criticism of expansion is the constant repetition of the claim that Russia had been promised during the Two plus Four negotiations on German unity that NATO would not expand eastwards. Hence, NATO is alleged to have broken its word with each admission of a new state that has applied to join it.

Besides the fact that Mikhail Gorbachev himself recently called this claim a myth (in the German TV news programme *heute journal* on 8 November 2014), there are above all two points that fundamentally contradict such a promise. The first is that such a promise – which has not been put down in writing anywhere for a reason – could only have been made by NATO in its entirety. Unanimity has always been NATO's basis for making decisions. However, only four of the then 16 members were present at the Two plus Four negotiations. The second point to which Gorbachev referred is even more decisive The Two plus Four Treaty was signed in Moscow on 12 September 1990. At the time, the Warsaw Pact still existed; it disintegrated just under a year later on 1 July 1991. To believe that arrangements for the time after the end of the Warsaw Pact could already have been discussed on that occasion is simply absurd.

The allegation that missile defence is destroying the strategic balance

Russian criticism of the buildup of a missile defence that goes back to the days of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is almost classic. The plans have been criticised ever since as being dangerous or having a destabilising effect or, with an eye to the technical requirements, are presented as being unfeasible or easy to counter. The criticism now almost has traits of hysteria since a NATO-wide missile defence based on four Aegis ships in the Mediterranean and the recently opened missile defence base in Romania (Deveselu) has been built up, with a further missile defence base being scheduled to open in Redzikowo, Poland, in 2018. Russia claims that the system of deterrence, which is, of course, based on mutual vulnerability, would be undermined if one side were to render itself virtually invulnerable.

Yet, missile defence is the weapon system most likely to be used for defensive purposes. It only becomes relevant in the event of a missile attack. From this point of view, Russia's argument that a Western missile defence is dangerous because it could neutralise Russia's nuclear potential appears odd. This can only be true when states continue to think in terms of attack and operational options.

A comparison of the figures also contradicts the strategic destabilisation argument. Russia has a total of more than 7,300 nuclear warheads, of which 1,790 are active. They can be fired by 299 intercontinental missiles (equipped with three warheads each). 704 of the active nuclear warheads are distributed among 160 sea-based intercontinental missiles. This potential is opposed in Deveselu, for example, by just 44 interceptor missiles. In addition, nuclear weapons can also be delivered with other carrier systems, such as aircraft or cruise missiles, against which a missile defence does not provide protection. It is therefore fundamentally impossible to achieve invulnerability.

It is also pointless to ask whom this defence capability is directed against. The proliferation of missile technology is one of the central threats not only to the Atlantic Alliance. Missile technology is comparatively cheap and, at a time when a modern mobile phone has more processing power than a large-capacity computer had in the 1980s, its range and accuracy can be continuously improved. Hence, aggressive regimes are becoming capable of projecting their power over long distances, and their achievement of intercontinental ranges is only a matter of time. Missile defence's justification lies in the fact that there are such things as missiles. The same is true for air defence: the majority of states around the world have an air defence system because there are such things as fighter and bomber aircraft – though there is no specification as to whom this air defence is precisely directed against.

What is more, missile defence contributes to deterrence. A potential attacker's risk-benefit assessment changes when he believes that the adversary's defence works (and has reason to believe so). He must expect his attack to be unsuccessful and at the same time risks acts of reprisal. Conversely, a state's trust in its own missile defence can lower its susceptibility to political blackmail in crisis situations. In both cases, missile defence exerts an effect without a shot being fired. If a state's deterrence does fail, however, missile defence can save lives and prevent damage being caused to its territory. This is not destabilising, but simply good sense.

Conclusions

This mere brief analysis of the accusations being made by Russia against NATO shows that Moscow's characterisation of NATO as a hostile and dangerous organisation has long been based on a fixed set of dubious arguments. Moscow's tone towards NATO has harshened once more since it has been trying to justify the breach of law in Ukraine with propaganda at home and abroad. Russia must therefore be expected to push ahead with the myth-making and present the well-trodden and long refuted accusations with renewed vehemence before the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016. The political fringes on both the left and right in Germany in particular will be pleased to pick up the spurious arguments.

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