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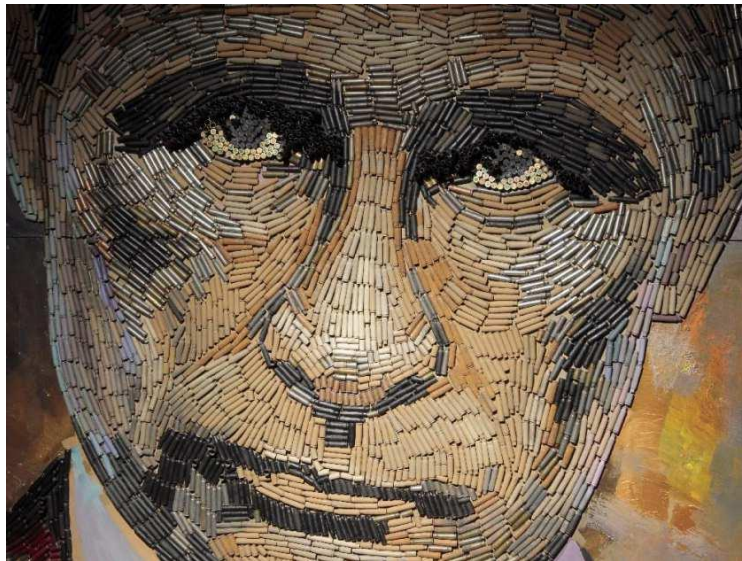
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The coming war with Russia

David Pugliese

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A couple of months before he retired in July, the head of Canada's air force provided a blunt assessment of what might emerge from the current military mission to Ukraine.

"We pray that our ongoing NATO mission isn't accompanied by the escalation of deadly force and the shedding of blood," Lt.-Gen. Yvan Blondin wrote in the magazine RCAF Today. "We have everything to lose and nothing to gain through a show-down with our former Eastern Bloc foes."

It was an unusual and candid observation from a veteran Canadian officer about the increased tensions and worsening situation in Ukraine. But Blondin's warning also reflects an increasing concern among some in the United States and Europe about the possibility that the standoff in eastern Europe between Russia and the West could somehow end in war.

Political and military analysts don't believe that either side would deliberately start such a war. But with large numbers of military forces operating in such close proximity, anything could happen, they warn.

Bloodshed could be spurred by something as simple as miscommunication between military units, for instance.

Or it could involve an accident, such as what almost happened in April when a Russian SU-27 fighter jet came within an estimated three to six metres of a U.S. military surveillance plane over the Baltic Sea. (The Pentagon complained to the Russians about the pilot's aggressive flying but the Russians countered that the U.S. spy plane was flying towards their border with its identification transponder turned off.)

Over the last year, tensions have increased to the point where Latvian Foreign Affairs Minister Edgars Rinkevics warned that Russian-Western relations had sunk to their lowest level since the Cuban missile crisis of the early 1960s.

NATO vessels, including Canadian frigates, now regularly patrol the Black Sea, closely monitored by Russian warships. American, Canadian and other NATO troops are training on Russia's doorstep. In October, NATO will launch one of its biggest exercises in years, with up to 36,000 personnel involved in war games designed to send a message to Russia that the alliance is ready to respond militarily if required. Some 1,600 Canadian military personnel, along with aircraft and five warships, will take part.

NATO has given much publicity to the exercise because it doesn't want any misunderstandings with the Russians that could lead to a confrontation. NATO hopes Russia will do the same for its own training exercises but so far that hasn't happened.

In March, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg raised concerns that the tensions have hurt communications with the Russians, who have launched a series of unscheduled, large-scale military exercises in eastern Europe. He worried the result could be miscommunication, sparking an incident between Russian and NATO forces that could spiral out of control.

The tense situation hasn't been helped by inaccurate claims from the alliance's commander, U.S. Gen. Philip Breedlove. When the crisis first started in 2014, Breedlove made the stunning announcement that Russia had assembled 40,000 troops on Ukraine's frontier, and he warned that an invasion was imminent. Months later, he claimed that more than 1,000 combat vehicles, as well as Russian forces, had crossed into Ukraine.

Breedlove's statements rattled officials in German Chancellor Angela Merkel's office. German intelligence agencies, which had good sources in the region, were reporting that there was no invasion. Merkel's officials dismissed Breedlove's claims as dangerous. The general didn't retreat on his statements.

But this past April, Breedlove surprised U.S. senators by acknowledging just how little NATO and the U.S. knew about Russia's activities.

He admitted he first learned from social media about a massive Russian exercise that unfolded in March across Eastern Europe. "Some Russian military exercises have caught us by surprise, and our textured feel for Russia's involvement on the ground in Ukraine has been quite limited," he told the senators.

Canada has its own concerns about war with Russia but the official line is that the situation can be contained.

"There is no doubt that (Russian President Vladimir) Putin's aggression in Ukraine is not an isolated concern," said Lauren Armstrong, spokeswoman for Defence Minister Jason Kenney. "We believe that a message of resolve and deterrence, in concert with our allies, is the best way to prevent a miscalculation on the part of Mr. Putin."

Others are not so sure. The lack of "textured feel" that Breedlove talked about has prompted former military officers in both Russia and the U.S. to call on their countries for new safeguards on the use of nuclear missiles.

Despite the end of the Cold War, the system governing the launching of such nuclear weapons is still geared towards crews firing those missiles within minutes of receiving their orders. In addition, Russian military doctrine calls for the use of nuclear weapons even in a conventional conflict if it believes its forces will be overwhelmed by the enemy.

In April, retired U.S. Gen. James Cartwright, who had commanded American nuclear forces, and retired Russian Maj. Gen. Vladimir Dvorkin, who headed the research institute of Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces, warned that both countries were at increased risk of an accidental war as the situation in Ukraine deteriorated.

Putin has already raised the spectre of nuclear war. Early on in the Ukraine crisis, he sent a less-than-subtle message. "It's best not to mess with us," he told a gathering of Russian youths in August 2014. "Thank God, I think no one is thinking of unleashing a large-scale conflict with Russia. I want to remind you that Russia is one of the leading nuclear powers."

Months later, Putin confirmed that he had contemplated whether nuclear weapons would be needed in the showdown with the West over the Crimea, acknowledging that he was ready to bring his country's nuclear weapons to a high state of alert.

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev also sounded warnings. He is critical of Putin's actions in Ukraine but he also blamed NATO for significantly increasing tensions as it expanded the alliance towards Russia's borders. "It could all blow up at any moment if we don't take action," he told the German magazine Der Spiegel in January 2015. "Moscow does not believe the West, and the West does not believe Moscow.

"Such a war today would probably lead inevitably to nuclear war," he added. "But the statements and propaganda on both sides make me fear the worst."

A slower march to war – rather than a miscalculation – is another scenario that has raised concerns. The former Soviet republics of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, all with populations of ethnic Russians, are now members of NATO. Under the NATO agreement, alliance countries are obliged to come to the aid of fellow members if they are under attack.

But what would NATO do if Russia acted in Latvia, Estonia or Lithuania, claiming it needed to protect the interests of those ethnic Russians? How would NATO forces, training in Latvia or Estonia, handle an incursion of covert Russian forces – troops wearing unmarked uniforms, which happened in some disputed areas in Ukraine?

"It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which either U.S. or Russian action could set in motion a chain of events at the end of which American and Russian troops would be killing each other," wrote Graham Allison, former assistant U.S. secretary of defence, and Dimitri Simes, publisher of the National Interest, a U.S. foreign policy magazine.

Their April 2015 article in the National Interest, titled "Russia and America: Stumbling to War," also highlighted the willingness of Russian hard-liners to use nuclear weapons if a conventional conflict got out of hand. "In these debates, many ask whether President Obama would risk losing Chicago, New York and Washington to protect Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius," the authors wrote.

"It is a troubling question. If you want to either dumbfound or silence a table next to you in a restaurant in Washington or Boston, ask your fellow diners what they think."

For now, Americans and Canadians say they would support a military response – at least in theory.

In June, the Pew Research Centre, based in Washington, conducted a survey in 10 nations to gauge views on the Ukraine crisis. The majority of Canadians and Americans interviewed responded that their nations should act militarily if a NATO nation was attacked. Almost half of those surveyed in the United Kingdom, Poland, and Spain also agreed.

There was a split, however, among the populations of some other NATO nations. "At least half of Germans, French and Italians say their country should not use military force to defend a

NATO ally if attacked by Russia,” the centre noted. (The survey was based on 11,116 interviews in NATO nations, Ukraine and Russia.)

Another scenario, short of war, that could also have serious consequences centres on the unintended effects of ongoing economic sanctions against Russia. The result, some analysts worry, could be widespread chaos, eventually leading to the fracturing of Russia into uncontrollable nuclear armed mini-states.

The sanctions are supposed to force Putin to back down on Ukraine and the Crimea. Yet he has shown no desire to reverse course. In fact, the economic sanctions have further shored up his support among the Russian people, who blame the West for their troubles, according to Pew researchers. Meanwhile, Russia’s economic situation has significantly worsened with the steep drop in oil prices.

Canada’s Conservative government has called for even more sanctions against the Russians but European nations, in particular Germany, have been leery. Tougher sanctions would further destabilize Russia, an outcome that is in no one’s best interest, German vice-chancellor Sigmar Gabriel warned.

It might, however, be too late to stave off such an outcome. Earlier this year Stratfor, a private intelligence firm with ties to the U.S. military and CIA, predicted economic sanctions, combined with low oil prices, could lead to the eventual collapse of Russia. Out of that would emerge smaller, poorer and potentially uncontrollable states.

Russia’s central government would no longer have control over the country’s 8,000 nuclear weapons – a situation Stratfor termed “the greatest crisis of the next decade.

“Russia is the site of a massive nuclear strike force distributed throughout the hinterlands,” Stratfor explained. “The decline of Moscow’s power will open the question of who controls those missiles and how their non-use can be guaranteed.”

The tension between Russia and the West isn’t expected to get better anytime soon. On both sides, attitudes seem to be hardening.

Some of Putin’s advisers see NATO’s ultimate goal as crippling Russia to the point where it cannot challenge the West, either militarily or economically. “The full financial force of the West is concentrated on attacking us,” Nikolai Starikov, a popular Russian pundit with links to the Putin regime, told a seminar in Russia in December. “What they are doing is smashing the foundations of a great geopolitical construction that will become their competitor.”

Last month, meanwhile, U.S. air force secretary Deborah James told American lawmakers that Russia was the biggest threat facing the country today. Gen. Joseph Dunford, slated to be the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, echoed that view. And U.S. Air Force Gen. Paul Selva, who is to become American’s number two military officer, said Russia has overtaken the Islamic State as the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland.

Earlier this year, Canada's Citizenship and Immigration Minister Chris Alexander voiced similar views. He said that while the war in Iraq and Syria is an important issue, the number one threat to world security is the crisis in Ukraine. Alexander called on all countries to come together to drive the Russians out of Crimea and Ukraine.

"There is absolutely no scenario going into the future that leads to peace and security for this world, that leads to prosperity in Europe globally that does not include a full international effort to give Ukraine the tools it needs to drive Russian forces from their borders and to secure its borders for good," he told Ukrainian Canadians in a speech in Toronto Feb. 22.

Less than a month later, U.S. Army Maj.-Gen. Robert Scales, former commandant of the U.S. Army War College, outlined a similar solution to the crisis but in blunter language. "The only way (the U.S.) can turn the tide is start killing Russians, killing so many Russians that even Putin's media can't hide the fact that Russians are returning to their motherland in body bags," the retired officer said.