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NATO's Expanding Military Frontier

By Brian Cloughley
June 30, 2017



In an examination in the *New Yorker* of the career and prospects of the US Secretary of Defence, General James Mattis, Dexter Filkins, a highly respected Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, noted President Trump's attitude to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and its military posture, and wrote that "along NATO's eastern frontier the Russian military maintain[s] tens of thousands of troops, many of them on high alert."

Merriam-Webster defines "frontier" as "a border between two countries" and it is therefore difficult to understand how 29 countries (as of June 5, when Montenegro formally joined) of the US-NATO military alliance can have a frontier with one country. There are only five NATO nations adjoining Russia: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Poland — and three of them

share but a few kilometres of border with the small Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic, and not with Russia proper.

Mr Filkins does not explain what “high alert” means or what it entails for Russian troops that are “maintained” within their own country in their own military barracks from which they regularly deploy to exercise their capabilities in local training areas. No reason or proof are given for their supposed status of “high alert”, nor is there an indication of how many “tens of thousands of troops” in Russia are menacing NATO’s hypothetical frontier. Two tens? Five tens? Nine tens? A few tens of thousands here and there do make a considerable difference to all sorts of things, not least the scale and redeployment of air support, which is an essential element of attack planning. But has there been any such activity?

Mr Filkins’ information about the purported Russian threat appears to have been supplied by the German Defence Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, who told him “We are nervous. The Baltics are terrified.”

Mr Filkins recorded the belief of “German officials” that in early 2017 “Russia had begun to flood NATO countries with propaganda and with funding for extremist political groups.” There is no evidence given for the allegation that any political groups are being financed by Moscow, but the propaganda flood is exemplified by the illustration that “In Germany, a news story about an Afghan refugee who had attempted to rape a fifteen-year-old girl appeared on Web sites across the country, then turned out to be fabricated. A similar case had arisen in Lithuania. All indications, von der Leyen told me, pointed to Russian intelligence as the source of the fake stories, which were intended to undermine Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Middle East.”

It is not clear why a fake (or even real) news story about rape in Lithuania might help Russia’s supposed campaign to undermine Chancellor Merkel (the most competent national leader in Europe) but there was a recent high-profile alleged rape case in Germany which was not a fake story and revealed much about the way some news is presented in the western media in bias against the admirable Ms Merkel. It is obvious that there is no need whatever for Russia to engage in covert Website antics to undermine Chancellor Merkel, even if this were desired, because she was challenged most energetically by the ultra Right Wing in Germany and by Britain’s largely xenophobic press.

In October 2016 a 19 year-old German girl was raped and murdered. After investigation a criminal charge was laid in December against an Afghan asylum-seeker who was detained in custody where he remains, pending trial. The case was given much publicity in Germany and by sections of the British press which seek to highlight what they consider to be the dangers to national security of a compassionate refugee policy. Trash (but popular) UK newspapers had headlines such as “leaders are still in denial over migrant crisis.” Germany’s right wingers and British media didn’t need Russian or any other nation’s intelligence operatives to steer them in the direction of ultra-nationalist anti-foreigner propaganda. They are quite capable of preaching their bigoted malevolence without outside help.

The fake story about “an Afghan refugee who had attempted to rape a fifteen-year-old girl” that was reported by Mr Filkins could not be traced, but much publicity had been given to a similar tale eighteen months ago when a “Russian-German” girl aged 13 told German police she had been abducted and raped by three men ‘from southern countries.’ Her story of January 2016 was a lie she made up because she had run away from home. European and Russian papers and television reported the so-called ‘Lisa case’ before the truth was established, and of course the story went bouncing round the social media.

There was much over-reaction, including in Russia where one news outlet went so far in fantasy as to allege that “in Germany and in Sweden, residents are regularly raped by refugees . . . but the local authorities and police hide these facts and do not open criminal investigations.” This sort of nonsense does nobody any good, and gave an opportunity for Frank Henkel, the Senator of the Interior and Sports of the German state of Berlin, and member of the German delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, to declare that there was “political pressure from abroad” which served to “clearly expose the propaganda that was linked to this case in the past few days.”

It is painfully obvious that social media goes wild when there are incidents — or non-incidents — like these, and public channels provide semi-literate and sometimes, quite clearly, seriously disturbed people with an opening to vent their emotions (one example being this series of tweets after the London Bridge terrorist attacks). But the notion that Twitter networking and Facebook, for example, could be manipulated in order to sway entire populations in the direction of supporting pro-Russian policies is bizarre.

The report on the ‘Lisa case’ in NATO’s *Review Magazine* was illuminating, even if it raises the question as to why on earth a domestic news item should necessitate an official NATO commentary.

It was stated by NATO that “In the ‘Lisa case’ we see evidence, for the first time, of several of the different Russian elements of influence that are described in this article working in a coordinated way: A journalist from the First Russian TV channel picked up the case of the Russian-German girl and brought it to the main news in Russia; Russian foreign media like RT, Sputnik and RT Deutsch reported on the case; Social media as well as right-wing groups distributed the information on the internet.” Then, making a fascinating if perhaps fragile connection between reportage of a case of a girl telling a lie about being raped and the situation in Ukraine, the NATO Review pronounced that “As a result of the ‘Lisa case’ and the different Russian activities in the context of the Ukraine conflict, we are seeing a shift in Germany from the dominance of the economy over politics to a dominance of politics over the economy. Russia has become a security risk, the relations are increasingly politicised and securitised.”

It is regrettable that from allegations of a Russian “high alert” along “NATO’s eastern frontier” to NATO assertions of sinister Russian machinations to employ “digital communication to influence public opinion” in Germany, the flood of anti-Russian propaganda continues to rise, as do numbers of US-NATO troops, combat and electronic warfare aircraft, and warships deploying as close as possible to Russia. The *Washington Post* reported that in May “General Mattis visited

U.S. troops massing near the border with Russia and declared that ‘We will deploy whatever capability is necessary here’,” which was yet another ratcheting up of confrontation, and it seems unlikely that there will be any relaxation of pressure, especially as anti-Russia hysteria grows in Washington.

Of one thing we can be certain : the military frontier of NATO will continue to expand.