

NATO Summit Trumped by Putin's Flanking Maneuvers

by Jeffrey Steinberg and Carl Osgood

Sept. 8—British plans to use the Sept. 4-5 NATO heads of state summit in Wales to launch an accelerated war provocation against Russia hit a brick wall as the result of critical flanking maneuvers by Russian President Vladimir Putin. As the NATO summit was beginning, Putin moved to establish a ceasefire between the Ukraine government and pro-Russia rebels in the east and southeast of the country. On Sept. 4, while en route to Mongolia, Putin held a telephone discussion with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko. Following that call, Putin issued a seven-point ceasefire plan that had formed the basis of his phone call. He voiced optimism that the scheduled Sept. 5 Minsk negotiating session of the Ukraine Contact Group would succeed in finalizing a prolonged ceasefire, opening the way for a complete political solution.

The meeting in Minsk did, in fact, result in a ceasefire agreement that has generally held so far, despite violations reported on both Sept. 7 and 8. Poroshenko issued a statement from the NATO summit, confirming that the agreement had been reached, and that he had ordered the Ukrainian armed forces to cease all military operations, and to withdraw to beyond artillery range from the population centers that had been under siege. The diplomatic breakthrough did not simply come from good will. In the two-week period preceding the NATO meeting and the ceasefire agreement, rebel forces, reinforced by Russian volunteers, crushed Ukrainian forces in several battles. By the time the NATO summit began, the Ukrainian Army was on the verge of defeat.

Despite the diplomatic break in Minsk, European Union nations, at the close of the NATO summit, announced they would go ahead with new sanctions against Russia. The NATO summit itself confirmed the creation of a British-led Joint Expeditionary Force, as well as the reinforcement of NATO's Rapid Reaction Force, to be specifically deployed against Russia, in the event of any "Russian provocations" against NATO members. And NATO is going ahead with a month-long

series of maneuvers under the umbrella of "Atlantic Resolve." These maneuvers will include "Rapid Trident," Sept. 16-26 in western Ukraine; "Sea Breeze," Sept. 8-10, involving the deployment of the second American Aegis ballistic missile defense destroyer the *USS Cook* into the Black Sea; and "Ample Strike," involving coordinated NATO ground and air operations in the Czech Republic. The U.S. has dispatched additional F-16s to Poland to participate in "Ample Strike." While NATO has conducted maneuvers in the past outside of NATO territory, this time NATO forces will be deployed in western Ukraine at a time when the country has been engaged in civil conflict.

Hysteria Among the Warmongers

British strategists were caught by surprise by Putin's successful counter-actions, and were depressed at the outcome of the NATO summit. As the summit was coming to a close, Edward Lucas, Senior Editor of *The Economist*, a prominent mouthpiece for the British oligarchy, delivered an hysterical call on U.S. National Public Radio for an escalation of economic and financial warfare against Russia. Lucas even called for Russian banks to be shut out of the Western banking system altogether.

A Sept. 5 conference call sponsored by the Atlantic Council to provide an assessment of the outcome of the summit registered a similar air of defeat. Former Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns, Atlantic Council President Fred Kempe, and Atlantic Council Executive Vice President Damon Wilson were all hoping that NATO would decisively confront Russia on its policies in Ukraine, but instead, they got the ceasefire agreement that was going into effect as they were speaking, taking the wind out of their sails. Burns complained that no proposals for significant military assistance to Ukraine came out of the summit, nor did any tough sanctions. "NATO missed an opportunity, here, to increase the cost to Putin with much tougher sanctions



White House/Pete Souza

While on a working visit to Mongolia, President Putin issued a seven-point ceasefire plan for Ukraine, after speaking with Ukrainian President Poroshenko by phone. Putin is shown here in Mongolia, with President Elbegdor (right) and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.

against Russia,” he said. “We can’t trust Putin. He will continue to try to intimidate the Ukrainian government. He will leave his forces on Ukrainian soil. He has outmaneuvered Europe.”

What the British Wanted

What the British warmongers wanted was unambiguously reflected in their input into the NATO summit.

On July 29, the House of Commons Defence Committee released a report entitled “Towards the next Defence and Security review: Part Two—NATO.” The thesis of this report—one of a series of reports the committee is producing on British defense policy—is that Russia is now the overriding threat that Britain and NATO must be prepared for, but it’s not like the Soviet threat of the Cold War era. The threat today is much more ambiguous, it says, in that Russia is capable of attacking, using methods that don’t rise to the threshold of Article 5’s provision for collective defense in the face of “armed attack”—as the Russian takeover of Crimea, and the 2007 cyberattack on Estonia supposedly show—and therefore NATO must adjust to this new reality.

“Our conclusion is that NATO is currently not well-prepared for a Russian threat against a NATO member

state,” the report says in its opening summary. “A Russian unconventional attack, using asymmetric tactics (the latest term for this is ‘ambiguous warfare’), designed to slip below NATO’s response threshold, would be particularly difficult to counter.” The 48-page report focuses on NATO’s Articles 4 (calls for “consultation” among members) and 5 because, among other reasons, “the attack on Ukraine has raised the possibility—however currently unlikely—of an attack, conventional or unconventional, on a NATO member state in the Baltics, potentially requiring an Article 5 re-

sponse; and because such a response would be challenging and requires significant adaptation from the UK and NATO.”

Among the report’s recommendations are the following: dramatic improvements to the existing NATO rapid reaction force; the pre-positioning of equipment in the Baltic States; and a continuous (if not technically “permanent”) presence of NATO troops, on training and exercise in the Baltic. All of these measures were, in fact, on the agenda for the summit. One of the measures they add to that is, “The circumstances in which the Article 5 mutual defense guarantee will be invoked in the face of asymmetric attack.”

Citing the Russian journal *Military Thought*, the Commons report states that “Russia has increasingly focused on new and less conventional military techniques. These asymmetric tactics (sometimes described as unconventional, ambiguous or non-linear warfare) techniques are both more aligned to Russian strengths, and considerably more difficult for NATO to counter.”

Chris Donnelly, Director of the Institute for Statecraft, defined the use of asymmetric warfare by Russia as “a form of warfare that integrates the use of conventional and unconventional force; integrates the use of force with non-military tools of warcyber, economic,

political; integrates the whole with an immensely powerful information warfare programme; and is backed up by an ideology. This is a change in the nature of conflict. The aim of the whole operation is to break the integrity of the state—in this case, Ukraine—before there is any need to cross its borders with an invasion force and trigger an Article 5 situation, were it a NATO country. So we are seeing a form of warfare that is operating under our reaction threshold.”

These Russian tactics, therefore, are “a new challenge to NATO” because, “Such operations may be designed to slip below NATO’s threshold for reaction,” and they can be deniable, further complicating a “credible and legitimate response.” One way around this problem, Donnelly suggests, is combining an Article 5 response with a UN Security Council Chapter 7 resolution, as was done after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. NATO invoked Article 5 in response to those attacks—the only time in its history it has done so—and deployed a contingent of AWACS aircraft to fly air defense missions over the United States—even though attribution of the attacks was still an open question.

“That NATO Article 5 declaration was used in conjunction with Chapter 7 UN Resolutions [allow the UN Security Council to take military action to “restore international peace and security”—ed.] to form the ISAF missions and take military action against the nation state of Afghanistan for harbouring those non-state actors and their promoters,” the report states. “Attribution therefore—even if of vicarious or ‘deniable’ promotion by nation states, such as in the situation in Ukraine—illustrates the developing need for NATO to re-examine the criteria and doctrines, both legal and military, for the declaration and use of Article 5 for collective defence and the declaration and use of associated Article 4 (itself only invoked four times) for collective security.”

Article 5 Threshold Already Eroding

While officially, NATO made no move to drop the word “armed” from Article 5 of the Charter, as the House of Commons report suggests, the lowering of the threshold is already underway with respect to such “ambiguous warfare,” to include cyberwarfare. The *New York Times* said as much in an Aug. 31 article reporting on NATO’s steps into cyberwarfare, and this was confirmed in NATO’s Sept. 5 communiqué.

“Cyber attacks can reach a threshold that threatens national and Euro-Atlantic prosperity, security, and stability. Their impact could be as harmful to modern societies as a conventional attack,” they said. “We affirm therefore that cyber defence is part of NATO’s core task of collective defence. A decision as to when a cyber attack would lead to the invocation of Article 5 would be taken by the North Atlantic Council on a case-by-case basis.”

The outlook of the House of Commons report was also reflected in comments made by NATO Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove, who told an Atlantic Council session in Wales that took place concurrent with the NATO summit on Sept. 4, that NATO members, especially the Baltic States that border Russia, must take into account such tactics, as allies prepare for future threats. That means steps should be taken to help build the capacity of other arms of government, such as interior ministries and police forces, to counter unconventional attacks, including propaganda campaigns, cyber-assaults or homegrown separatist militias. “What we see in Russia now, in this hybrid approach to war, is to use all the tools they have . . . to stir up problems they can then begin to exploit through their military tool.”

Indeed, the communiqué discusses the threat of an attack against NATO members *without* the use of the word “armed.” It says that “The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. No one should doubt NATO’s resolve if the security of any of its members were to be threatened. NATO will maintain the full range of capabilities necessary to deter and defend against any threat to the safety and security of our populations, wherever it should arise.”

This lowering of the threshold for NATO to go to war, once again, highlights the necessity of releasing the classified 28 pages of the Congressional Joint Inquiry into the 9/11 attacks. The attack on Afghanistan in 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, were based on a false premise that those countries were behind the attacks, when the classified 28 pages, according to evidence in the public record, says otherwise. The House of Commons scheme for modeling a future response to Russia based on the actions taken in response to the 9/11 attacks would then be shown to be the fraud, potentially leading to World War III, that it is.