

Opinion – NATO’s Real Message to the Kremlin

Written by Maarten Wensink

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MAARTEN WENSINK, JUL 5 2022

The Madrid summit saw NATO designate Russia its most significant threat – a strong signal in the context of the remilitarization of Europe. Yet NATO is also signalling something else. Rhetoric from Kyiv and the West increasingly departs from the facts on the ground, but future weapon supplies to Ukraine could change this; the question is by how much. If Western rhetoric heats up too much, the Kremlin might consider itself to be facing, again, one final possibility of dealing with a growing threat. The last time Russia thought itself in this position, it acted.

During the lead-up to Russia’s invasion, Western leaders understandably assured their citizens that they would not be drawn into war with Russia – if Putin found the West more resolved than he anticipated, he just might have been listening to its leaders. But the NATO option remained on the table. NATO, then, effectively told Russia that Ukraine would join NATO the moment an opportunity emerged, but that if Russia attacked now, Ukraine would stand alone. This is under-appreciated in the West.

Take Scholz’s words to Putin about Ukraine’s perspectives of joining NATO: “That is not an issue we will likely encounter while we are in office. I don’t know how long the president intends to stay in office. I’ve got a feeling it will be a long time, but not forever.” While perhaps meant as reassuring, or as an offer to park the issue, addressing a man who regularly emphasizes the perceived disastrous long-term consequences of his predecessors’ naiveté these words could hardly have been more alarming. And Putin was right, of course: leaders should look beyond their time in office.

As Russia invaded, the same thing happened. Europe asserted that within years, it would no longer want Russia’s gas. It also asked Russia to kindly deliver now, for else it would get very cold in Europe. The effective message: if Russia wanted to draw its gas weapon on Europe, now would be the time. Again there was no dearth of good listeners in Moscow. Paradoxically, if Europe had stated that under no circumstances would it touch its energy relationships with Russia, it might very well have prevented increased inflows into the Russian treasury.

The West’s real messages to the Kremlin “attack now, it is your last chance; cut our gas now, it is your last chance” – seem to escape everyone in Brussels but no one in the Kremlin. Western statements and short-term objectives are not aligned with long-term strategy, but with emotions, and the message is not tuned to Moscow, but to Kyiv and the Western public. Listening, analysis, and modesty are in short supply. The result: maximum demolition of Ukraine, maximum demotion of the West.

Emboldened by Western support, president Zelensky has recently floated the idea of retaking not only the Donbass, but even Crimea. He found apparent support in France, despite that country’s initial moderation. Yet over the last few weeks, synchronous with increasing rhetoric from Kyiv and its Western followers, Russia has pressed home its military advantages. Surely, morale seems to be low and losses have mounted, but superior Russian fire power is making itself felt.

Regarding the difficult Russian advance, it has been discussed that successful offensive operations require overwhelming force. If, then, Russia were to consolidate and play defence, Ukraine would need an immense quantity of Western fire power to retake the Donbass, let alone Crimea. Not only would delivering such fire power spell downright ecological disaster, it would also create an enormously militarized state right at Russia’s doorstep while

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today's Ukraine can still be defeated, as recent developments suggest.

NATO should therefore carefully consider the signal it wants to send. Many Western military planners seem to think that Russia will content itself with the Donbass and the part of Southern Ukraine that links it to Crimea – greater operations would require general mobilization, which is not currently considered. Yet if NATO were to socialize the idea in Moscow that this will be its very last chance to neutralize a growing threat, Moscow might rethink. Effectively, Moscow would face the same strategic dilemma it perceived on February 23rd. We know the choice it will make.

Surely there is a quantity of strategic posturing in setting goals. Yet with communication increasingly broken, it is becoming less clear that Russia expects the West to timely dial down the rhetoric (and acts). Unfortunately, Western leaders seem more concerned with kudos from Kyiv than with their opponent's perspective.

About the author:

Maarten Wensink is a statistician and medical doctor who specializes in real-world data. He works as an epidemiologist in the private sector and formerly was an associate professor in epidemiology at the University of Southern Denmark.