Assessing the three main security threats facing Europe in the wake of the Ukraine crisis

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The crisis in Ukraine, which began in 2013, has had significant implications for European security. **Cristian Nitoiu** *identifies three perceived security threats implied by developments in Ukraine and how these threats may develop in future years: the threat of so called 'hybrid warfare' spilling over from the standoff between Ukraine and Russia; the threat posed by nuclear weapons; and the threat posed by more conventional forms of warfare.*

Perceptions of security threats are arguably more salient than actual threats, most times having a deep influence on the actions of states and other international actors. Hence, they play a key role in the way the EU, Kyiv and Moscow will shape their policies towards each other in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.

While Russia can employ a wide range of capabilities, the EU and Ukraine have very few instruments to tackle security threats, be they traditional or non-traditional. In the case of Ukraine, but also more broadly the post-Soviet space, EU-Russia/Ukraine relations are affected by the perception of three types of security threats: so called 'hybrid warfare', nuclear threats and traditional military threats (i.e. territorial invasion).

Hybrid warfare

In the West and Ukraine the perception of the threat posed by hybrid war has recently increased sharply. The annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine have put the spotlight on the way states engage in conflict by using a series of (sometimes innovative) tools and strategies. Hybrid war combines the use of conventional and non-conventional capabilities, the use of irregular troops, cyber-attacks, support for terrorist, rebel and criminal groups, or the use of the media and civil society for propaganda purposes. In eastern Ukraine in particular we have witnessed a combination of the use of both state and non-state actors by all the sides involved. States tend to use parts of this toolkit even in times of peace, however in such situations these instruments are not combined in order to pursue certain assertive foreign policy goals.

The EU, Ukraine and Russia have invested in the development of such instruments. Moscow, however, seems to have an overt preference for combining them. In this endeavour the Kremlin particularly relies on supporting criminal and rebel groups, sending irregular forces (whilst not recognising them), spreading its propaganda through media and civil society, or enticing local Russian minorities against indigenous authorities. On the other hand, Russia argues that the EU has engaged in a hybrid war of its own by supporting NGOs and masking its geopolitical interests behind the mantra of democracy promotion.

While hybrid warfare might have proved its effectiveness with the use of the so called 'little green men' in Crimea, or the actions of the rebels in eastern Ukraine, it does have certain limitations. Firstly, hybrid war tends to be localised and driven on the ground primarily by a mix of economic (in some cases criminal) and ideological aspects. Secondly, it is much harder to control by the states who initiate it as it operates on multiple levels and through a wide range of actors. Thirdly, it is easy to contain as states are reluctant to use most or all of their capability in the conduct of hybrid war. Fourthly, it is more effective when it operates in areas characterised by economic or political instability.

In assessing the potential scenarios that may occur in the context of the use of hybrid warfare, the situation is likely to develop between two extreme points. The most positive scenario would be one where the hybrid warfare witnessed in eastern Ukraine does not spread to other parts of the country or to other states which have large

Russian minorities (such as the Baltic states). Under this scenario, Ukraine would develop a more stable political environment and economy, reducing the effectiveness of hybrid warfare. At the same time, Ukraine would at least partly address the economic and ideological grievances of those engaged in the war, in this sense diminishing their perception of the threats they face. The EU would play a key role in mediating this process.

The most negative potential scenario would be one in which Ukraine fails to develop a stable political environment, and maintains a rigid position in relation to the ideological grievances of those engaged in the war. The associated increase in the level of threat perceived by both sides, with opinions likely to become increasingly radical and the EU unable to mediate or contain the potential spillover of the war into other arenas, would be the key concern in this scenario.
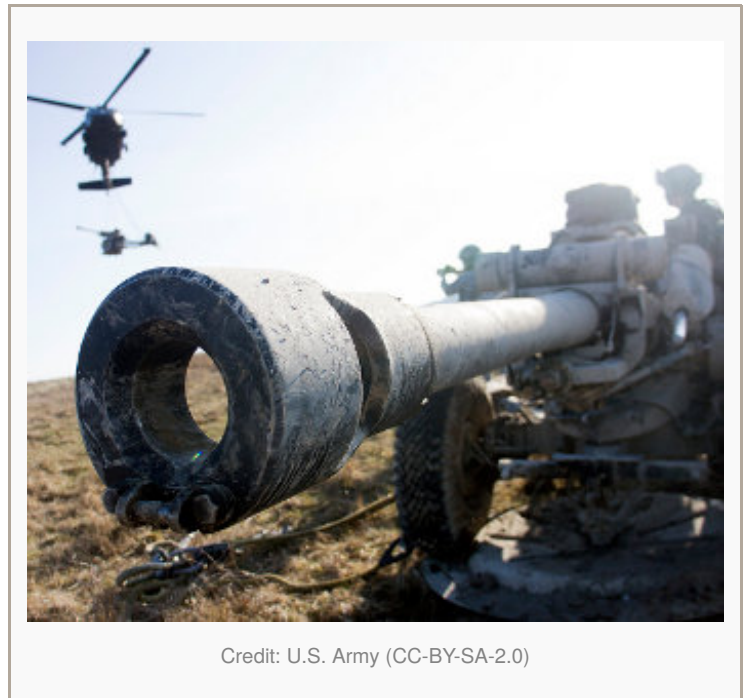
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Nuclear weapons

The threat posed by nuclear weapons is arguably at its highest level since the end of the Cold War. Russia has started to invest again in its nuclear arsenal, with plans to station significant capabilities in Crimea. Nevertheless, the probability of nuclear weapons being used in the context of the Ukraine crisis, or as a result of it, is quite slim.

During the Cold War nuclear weapons primarily acted as a deterrent which prevented full blown conflict from emerging between the two superpowers. In the present context, their use can be associated with the spread of instability in the Russian state, which provides the Kremlin with more incentives to take irrational decisions. These incentives can either come from the international arena or originate from within Russia.

In this context, the most positive scenario would be one where Russia maintains a certain degree of political stability which discourages its leaders from the use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, Russian leaders might resort to threatening (without genuinely aiming to put this strategy into practice) the use of nuclear weapons if the interests of the country are perceived to be challenged more seriously in its 'sphere of influence' in the post-Soviet space.

The most negative scenario would be one where a mixture of deep political instability in Russia coupled with a heightened perception that the country is under threat from multiple directions, might make leaders in the Kremlin resort to irrational decisions, including the use of nuclear weapons. One example might be a combination of extreme nationalists gaining more influence in the Kremlin and Ukraine intervening militarily in Crimea in order to win back control over the peninsula.

Conventional warfare

During the Ukraine crisis there were many speculations that Russia might launch a conventional attack on Ukraine in order to occupy the eastern part of the country, the Black Sea shores of Ukraine, or to create 'Novorossiya'. Nevertheless, Russia did not put any of these presumed plans into action, and resorted more to engaging in hybrid warfare.

Conventional forces were instead employed by the Ukrainian government, which could not rely on the same range of instruments and capabilities as the Kremlin. Since the summer of 2014, and the launch of the anti-terrorist

campaign in eastern Ukraine, the government in Kyiv has reformed the military and invested in its modernisation. However, it is still doubtful whether it can have the same level of effectiveness as Russia when engaging in this war.

The most positive scenario in this context is that the Minsk agreements are fully implemented and eastern Ukraine is de-militarised under UN or OSCE supervision. The most negative scenario is that Ukraine starts a military campaign to recapture control over the Donbas region and Crimea, while Russia launches a full blown offensive using a wide range of capabilities, which has the potential to drag NATO into the conflict and spill over into the European continent.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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