



## Clouds of Suspicion: Airspace Arrangements, Escalation, and Discord in U.S./NATO-Russian Relations

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### Executive Summary

Policy makers in the Euro-Atlantic region are concerned that incidents involving military or civilian aircraft could result in dangerous escalation of conflict between Russia and the West.<sup>a</sup> This brief introduces the policy problem and traces the evolution of three sets of cooperative airspace arrangements developed by Euro-Atlantic states since the end of the Cold War—(1) cooperative aerial surveillance of military activity, (2) exchange of air situational data, and (3) joint engagement of theater air and missile threats—in order to clarify the current regional airspace insecurity dynamics and identify opportunities to promote transparency and confidence in U.S./NATO-Russian relations.

### Introduction: Insecurity in Euro-Atlantic Airspace

On March 3, 2014, a Russian reconnaissance plane came into close proximity with a Scandinavian Airlines passenger airliner.<sup>1</sup> This unidentified aircraft—a Russian Il-20—was carrying out its flight with disabled transponders in international airspace near the Swedish city of Malmö.<sup>b</sup> During the incident, which endangered the lives of innocent passengers, the two planes reportedly passed within 90 meters of one another.<sup>2</sup>

This near miss took place in the midst of a deteriorating political-military environment in the Euro-Atlantic region that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The conflict between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian military forces also posed dangers to regional airspace users. On July 17, 2014, the separatists reportedly used a Russian-produced high-altitude air defense system to down a Malaysian passenger airliner (MH17) transiting through Ukrainian airspace.

<sup>a</sup> The phrase “Euro-Atlantic region” refers to the area “from Vancouver to Vladivostok” encompassing Canada, the United States, Europe, and Russia.

<sup>b</sup> Aircraft with disabled transponders would be visible only to primary radar, appearing as an unidentified object on the civilian air traffic control operator's screen. Upon detecting the presence of an aircraft with a disabled transponder, the (ground-based) secondary radar would be unable to interrogate its transponder system, thus unable to positively confirm its identification, bearing, or range.

The incident resulted in the deaths of nearly 300 innocent civilians—most of them citizens of The Netherlands.<sup>3</sup>

In the months that followed, NATO officials repeatedly voiced concerns regarding the behavior of Russian military aircraft in close proximity to the sovereign airspaces of NATO members, especially Central and Eastern European (CEE) states.<sup>c</sup> As in the incident with the Scandinavian Airlines passenger jet, the Russian aircraft flew in international airspace without filing an advance flight plan and with their transponders disabled.<sup>4</sup> Russian officials also publicly acknowledged the escalation dynamic between NATO and Russian military forces. They, however, argued that NATO’s aerial reconnaissance activities and a “significant build-up” of military aircraft in CEE were more dangerous than the “training” flights carried out by Russian military aviation.<sup>5</sup>

At the February 2015 high-level Munich Security Conference, German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger asked Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to comment on the provocative behavior of Russian military aircraft. Ischinger pointed out the importance of trying “to create an arrangement that would at least enable all of us—Russia, NATO, the United States, European countries—to avoid potentially dangerous close military encounters.”<sup>6</sup> In response, Lavrov blamed NATO for the problem and noted the importance of now-halted NATO-Russian cooperation that promoted mutual airspace security, transparency, and predictability.<sup>7</sup> With Russia and NATO lacking effective ways to bridge the political chasm between them, a newfound insecurity in Euro-Atlantic airspace has become the new normal.

## **A Study of Euro-Atlantic Airspace Arrangements**

Breaches of airspace sovereignty, coercive aerial threats, and incidents involving civilian and military aircraft are all vectors for conflict escalation. Washington and Moscow recognized this during the Cold War when they quietly negotiated the 1972 Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas. This accord circumscribed certain activities of naval vessels and their aviation—most notably the “buzzing” of vessels by naval aircraft.<sup>8</sup> Another bilateral accord, the 1989 Agreement on Preventing Dangerous Military Activities, called for “great caution and prudence” on behalf of all military forces in areas where they might be in close proximity.<sup>9</sup> Despite the emergence of these and other “prudent practices” in their bilateral relationship, the United States and the Soviet Union were unable to agree to place limits on similar military activities in a bloc-to-bloc context.<sup>10</sup>

When the Cold War ended, efforts to circumscribe potentially dangerous activities waned. Instead, former adversaries reduced their offensive potentials and improved their airspace security through cooperative arrangements. The first involved *cooperative aerial surveillance* of military facilities through the Open Skies Treaty, signed in 1992. Under this treaty, U.S./NATO, Russia, and other states in the region monitored—and continue to monitor—their respective conventional and nuclear force postures. Another set of airspace arrangements, championed by the United States and NATO beginning in 1993, created a network to *exchange*

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<sup>c</sup> CEE states are Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania.

*air situational data* fused from civil air traffic control and military radar. Through these so-called Airspace Initiatives, U.S./NATO, Russia, and other states in the region constructed a capability to jointly observe and react to airspace activity in their common border areas. Finally, states in the region also developed practical ways to *cooperate on theater air and missile defense* issues beginning in the 1990s. Through these arrangements, U.S./NATO and Russia started to build rules of engagement to counter common aerial threats.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, states in the Euro-Atlantic expressed and institutionalized trust through these cooperative political-military airspace arrangements. In addition to their unilateral capabilities to observe activity in their own airspaces and, to varying degrees, look into the airspaces of their neighbors, states institutionalized reciprocal exchanges of information in order to improve relations with neighbors and the broader regional security environment.

While these political-military arrangements were useful to some regional stakeholders, they could also be ineffective or harmful to others and lead to discord. States could deliberately misuse these arrangements to achieve their broader political-military goals. Cooperative efforts to buttress the airspace sovereignty of one state could be perceived as diminishing the security of another and/or destabilizing the regional security environment.

This brief uses airspace arrangements as a lens for understanding the evolution of political-military relationships in the region since the end of the Cold War. It seeks to answer the question: *How have cooperative airspace arrangements contributed to cooperation and discord in the Euro-Atlantic region?* The sections of the brief that follow focus on the Open Skies Treaty, Airspace Initiatives, and Joint Engagement of Theater Air and Missile Threats. The brief then refocuses on current escalation dangers and concludes with a discussion of the broader challenge of regional security.

## **The Open Skies Treaty**

The Open Skies Treaty (OST) is an unprecedented regime that facilitates cooperative aerial surveillance of military activities across the Euro-Atlantic region. The agreement currently includes 34 states and spans the territory from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Its preamble notes the intent to “contribute to the further development and strengthening of peace, stability and cooperative security” in the region and highlights “the possibility of employing such a regime to improve openness and transparency, to facilitate the monitoring of compliance with existing or future arms control agreements and to strengthen the capacity for conflict prevention and crisis management.”<sup>11</sup>

Initially conceived by the Bush administration in 1989 as a bilateral overflight initiative with the Soviet Union, the OST proposal was transformed into a multilateral concept after an intervention by the government of Canada.<sup>12</sup> The treaty’s signing in 1992 would not have been possible without the leadership of the governments of Canada and Hungary, who cajoled their counterparts in the United States, the Soviet Union, and across Europe and promoted the cooperative aerial surveillance mechanism.<sup>13</sup> Despite the delay of entry into force until 2002—because of Russia’s inability to achieve ratification—more than 1,300 photographic overflights have been carried out under the agreement.<sup>14</sup>

During the overflights, representatives of observer nations photograph and use other previously-agreed upon sensors to image military-significant facilities.<sup>d</sup> The flights are carried out in presence of and in cooperation with representatives of the observed nation. The data downloaded from OST aircraft sensors is accessible for a small fee to all treaty signatories through common data bank at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This allows all 34 states parties the opportunity to observe the overflown states' force posture and military infrastructure.<sup>15</sup>

Since its signing, OST has worked to promote military transparency, facilitate the implementation of arms control accords, and to buttress deterrence. Today, the treaty is a keystone of the region's security architecture, and its continued relevance has been highlighted by its use during the Ukraine conflict. There, OST has allowed the aerial observation and imaging of the situation on the ground. It has also strengthened U.S./NATO efforts to reassure allies and partners.

However, the treaty has faced various political challenges that remain unresolved as of present. For example, Russia and Georgia were unable to constructively resolve their differences after the 2008 war, and instead of employing the OST chose to suspend mutual overflights. Russia has also used the treaty in attempts to force others to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Russia's annexation of Crimea. Turkey, like Russia, has also used the treaty mechanism for political purposes—to deny OST membership to Cyprus.<sup>16</sup>

With the improvement in the quality, resolution, and availability of commercial satellite imagery, OST sensors have also declined in terms of their technological edge.<sup>17</sup> Despite efforts to move OST to the use of digital sensors, the United States has voiced concerns about Russia's overflights of U.S. territory with its new digital sensor package.<sup>18</sup> Russia, in turn, has restricted certain Western overflights over certain military installations, e.g. in Kaliningrad. On the U.S./NATO's end, NATO countries do not overfly one another, prompting Russian concerns about being "data starved."<sup>19</sup>

At present, the OST plays an important role in the regional exchange of information on conventional forces. Due to the breakdown of the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty in 2007, the OST and the Vienna Document have been the key remaining military information-exchange mechanisms between Russia and the West. Since the suspension of CFE inspections by and in Russia in 2007, OST could partially make up for some of the information with regard to conventional forces stationed at Russia's military bases. The OST also has allowed Western countries to overfly Russian naval bases in the Black Sea area. Experts acknowledge that there is no other agreement to facilitate the transparency of naval forces.<sup>20</sup>

Because the treaty mechanism is based in the OSCE, OST has managed to operate while other U.S. and NATO military-military activities with Russia have been suspended. However, the OSCE needs to be a stronger regional security institution if it is to benefit OST implementation. In addition to shrinking funds for treaty implementation, OST has also been unable to attract new member states.

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<sup>d</sup> The sensor package may include visible-light photography, sideways-looking synthetic aperture radar, and infrared sensors—all commercially available systems that have to be certified in advance by all treaty participants.

To strengthen the OST’s position and benefit the broader regional security context, OST members could:

- Actively publicize the agreement’s role in Ukraine, and in whatever political solution is found for that conflict;
- Work to resolve compliance issues, especially those involving Russia, Georgia, and Turkey;
- Speed up the transition to digital OST sensors and utilize commercially available satellite imagery and data from unmanned systems in a way that reduces the need for unilateral/allied surveillance operations in close proximity to NATO and Russian borders;
- Expand the treaty to include Commonwealth of Independent States/Cooperative Security Treaty Organization (CIS/CSTO) members that are hosting Russian air bases, including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan;<sup>e</sup>
- Strengthen OSCE as a security management institution and build its capacity for preventing conventional war in Europe and resolving frozen conflicts.

### **Airspace Initiatives**

The exchange of air situational data between NATO and non-NATO nations has become a relatively common practice in the Euro-Atlantic region.<sup>f</sup> More than just a way to mitigate the risks of accidental or inadvertent escalation, the exchange of airspace data is a powerful a transparency measure that has the potential to promote confidence, predictability, and security cooperation among neighbors and within a broader region. It offers additional detection time and the potential for improved coordination among neighbors in response to developments in their common airspace.

Since their inception, U.S.-led Airspace Initiatives recognized that this type of cooperation carries the potential to build confidence, predictability, and security between neighbors and within the broader Euro-Atlantic region. As the Clinton administration’s Presidential Review Directive-36 noted in 1993, this type of cooperation has great potential in “enhancing intra-regional habits of cooperation and reducing the likelihood or fear of war among participating states.”<sup>g</sup> At present, the infrastructure for the real-time exchange of information about airspace activity between NATO and non-NATO nations is available for use in the Euro-Atlantic. This infrastructure consists of three projects, the Regional Airspace Initiatives (RAI), NATO’s Air Situational Data Exchange (ASDE), and the NATO-Russia Council Cooperative Airspace Initiative (CAI).

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<sup>e</sup> CIS/CSTO states include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

<sup>f</sup> The fusion of data from national ground-based civil air traffic control radars with military radar data is used to generate a common airspace picture—a shared display of all activity within the common airspace that supplements the basic capability of civil and military air traffic controllers in neighboring states to track aircraft and communicate by voice.

<sup>g</sup> Presidential Review Directive-36, “U.S. Policy Toward Central and Eastern Europe,” July 5, 1993, Annex 5, pg. 1. A copy of PRD-36 was released in 2012 following a declassification review request submitted by the author of this thesis to the Clinton Presidential Library/National Archives in 2009.

The RAI were bilateral projects between the United States and 17 states in the Euro-Atlantic. Initiated in 1994, they involved the development of airspace sovereignty centers, radar upgrades, emergency communication centers, and improvements in command and control.<sup>21</sup> The initiative's goals were, among others, to "increase cooperation among CEE countries in [air traffic control and to] support a modernized CEE regional air sovereignty system that could be integrated into NATO systems, if desired in the future."<sup>22</sup> For many CEE countries wishing to join NATO, RAI studies developed networks of Air Sovereignty Operations Centers (ASOCs)<sup>h</sup> and networked systems such as BALTNET that could easily plug into NATO air defenses when those countries joined NATO.<sup>23</sup> But, while the RAI studies succeeded in building cooperation among participant states and facilitating CEE integration into NATO, they also had the unintended consequence of straining NATO-Russia relations.

The ASDE program engages eight NATO states and ten non-NATO nations in reciprocal exchanges of filtered airspace activity data. Created in 2001, the program was "designed to enhance mutual situational awareness, enhance transparency and minimize possible cross-border air incidents. [It] also provides Partner countries with insight into NATO procedures and offers valuable training experience."<sup>24</sup> While this program has been successful in increasing airspace awareness, it has also been controversial insofar as it appeared to prepare NATO aspirants in the NIS for integration into NATO air defenses. At least in the Georgia case, ASDE was unsuccessfully used as a way to deter Russian military action in 2008. In the ongoing Ukraine conflict, the program provides a way for the alliance to reassure Ukraine.

Of all the Airspace Initiatives, the CAI perhaps presents the most interesting example. Proposed in 2002 by the United States as a "Russian ASOC," the program developed into a NATO-Russia Council effort to jointly counter the September 11-type threat of a hijacked aircraft being used against ground targets.<sup>25</sup> It involved the reciprocal exchange of filtered airspace activity data, emergency communication channels, and exercises involving fighter aircraft scramble and handoff.<sup>26</sup>

A NATO-Russia Council project that directly connected Russia and three NATO states (Norway, Poland, and Turkey), the CAI also facilitated cooperation with the United States. By directly engaging Poland and Russia, it further symbolized a new era of cooperation between Russia and new NATO members. In fact, the Polish ASOC is the entity that developed the CAI's concept of implementation in Poland.<sup>27</sup> While the CAI was nurtured to the final testing phase in 2013 and involved numerous military to military exercises between Russia and NATO countries, it was halted in 2014. Ultimately, the rationale of common counterterrorism cooperation was insufficient to keep it going through the Ukraine crisis. Its halt also underlined the fact that neither Russia nor NATO were politically ready to take the next step and seriously discuss cooperative air/missile defense in the region.

The RAI studies that facilitated the exchange of air situational data between NATO and then-NATO-aspirants such as Poland and the Baltic states offer a useful precedent for improving air

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<sup>h</sup> An ASOC is a peacetime data fusion system that facilitates the safe and secure management of a country's airspace. "The primary command and control center in [a] country, [an] ASOC collects radar and flight plan data and develops a recognized air picture. [This air picture] allows each of the ASOC nations to track aircraft operating in their airspace and take defensive actions when and if appropriate." Daryl Mayer, "ASOC Working Group Explores Next Decade," ESC Public Affairs, undated.

sovereignty and promoting information sharing to reduce the fear of war among participating states. Projects like NATO ASDE and the CAI—if extended to the exchange of data about military aircraft—have the potential to buttress deterrence and contribute to conflict prevention. All relevant stakeholders remain interested in this idea, which could facilitate a discussion on “rules of the road.” To reenergize these arrangements and the broader context, the participants could:

- Restart cooperation within the NATO-Russia Council or, at a minimum, the technical operation of CAI networks on a bilateral level between Russia and its NATO counterparts;
- Expand CAI to the tracking of military aircraft to prevent and resolve incidents related to aircraft with disabled transponders in the common border area;
- Connect the CAI to ASDE and, more specifically, build connectivity between Russia and Ukraine, Finland, and the Baltics states;
- Use the CAI as a discussion forum for participant states to identify threatening activities and work toward regional airspace safety.

### **Joint Engagement of Theater Air and Missile Threats**

Cooperation between Russia and the West to counter conventional theater air and missile threats could have been a powerful mechanism to facilitate predictability of military operations and alleviate concerns about aerial attack. Given Russia’s history of concerns about aerial attacks from the West, engagement could have alleviated Moscow’s pervasive sense of vulnerability after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, Russia continued to fear NATO expansion to CEE in light of growing U.S. conventional might. Any prospect for intra-regional cooperation between Russia and the West eventually disappeared with the emergence of two *separate* air defense networks—one comprised of NATO and its new CEE members and the other involving Russia, Belarus, and four other states in the CIS/CSTO. Today, political-military arrangements created by NATO and Russia to engage theater air and missile threats are postured in a way that divides the region and inhibits mutual security.

After several rounds of NATO expansion, the number of countries participating in NATO’s air defense network went from 16 to 28. As an increasingly integrated network for command, control, communication, and computers powered by information fused from old and new members, the NATO air/missile defense system is a strong, yet unacknowledged, milestone for NATO expansion to the East. The infrastructure of radar installations for surveillance and identification, and aircraft for escort and air sovereignty has consequentially crept closer to Russian borders. Designed to provide security assurances to the Baltics, Air Policing patrols instead potentially increased tensions with Russia. In addition, NATO could also draw on U.S. offensive and defensive capabilities, at a time when the United States has unrivaled conventional superiority.

Since 1995, Russia has sought to facilitate air defense cooperation within the CIS/CSTO. This cooperation has allowed Russia to create a small geographic buffer by deploying radar and air defense systems in Belarus, as well as expanding the reach of its airspace awareness to the south by facilitating cooperation in Central Asia. A decline of Russia’s conventional forces has left

Moscow with few credible conventional deterrence options, and the inability to reinvigorate two key arms control treaties—the CFE and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty—has contributed to the destruction of whatever semblance of regional order was achieved after the end of the Cold War. Thus, Moscow shifted to a reliance on the development of anti-access systems and articulation of coercive strategies, especially against NATO members in the CEE.

Cooperation between Russia and the West on theater air and missile defense issues could have been a powerful mechanism to facilitate the predictability of military operations and alleviate concerns about aerial attack and coercion. Instead, engagement on these issues merely lumbered along before ending in 2013 after both sides admitted that their “aims and objectives” for on this issue were different.<sup>28</sup> When the Ukraine crisis put an end to U.S./NATO-Russian military cooperation, Washington and Brussels were left with no way to deal with potentially escalatory encounters resulting from Russian air operations. Russia’s alleged transfer of air defense systems to non-state actors in Ukraine also resulted in the downing of MH17, thus potentially eroding the consensus between Russia and the West on countering aerial terrorism.

Restarting cooperation on joint engagement of air and missile threats could reduce the underlying ability to use airpower and anti-access/area-denial capabilities for coercion. NATO and Russia could:

- Discuss rules of the road with regard to air defense and reconnaissance activities, including unmanned systems;
- Discuss rules of the road for air defense activity in conflict areas;
- Develop cooperative activities for air forces in countering aerial threats from non-state actors; consider whether civilian aircraft security once again be a shared interest;
- Develop a model fusion center for theater air/missile defense activities that builds cooperation between NATO and non-NATO nations, especially including those in Russia and the CIS/CSTO.

### **Dangers of Escalation in a U.S./NATO-Russian Conflict**

Even before the conflict in Ukraine, Western analysts were concerned about escalation dynamics in a potential conflict with Russia, especially if Moscow became politically or economically unstable.<sup>29</sup> Some argued that policy makers had a “misplaced faith in strategic stability” insofar as the U.S.-Russian relationship is concerned.<sup>30</sup> To this end, “escalation dynamics in a conflict between NATO and Russia would not hinge on the risks of a strategic nuclear exchange, at least not initially, rather, they would build from the bottom up.”<sup>31</sup> Among the chief candidates for escalatory conflicts would be a Russian engagement in the Baltics or a conflict between Poland and Belarus, which would put similar escalatory pressures on NATO and Russia.<sup>32</sup>

Russia’s “saber-rattling” vis-à-vis NATO members in the CEE has raised the specter of a nuclear conflict in Europe. For example, if Russia were to use its conventional forces to invade the Baltic states, it would use mobile air defense systems to create a “bubble” that would cover seized territory.<sup>33</sup> Conflicts are prone to escalation across several dimensions, including intensity, capabilities, and geographical scope. And, in order to come to the defense of the Baltics, U.S./NATO forces would have to conduct a campaign to suppress and destroy these systems and

any other anti-access capabilities.<sup>34</sup> The danger is that Russia would choose to escalate to the use of tactical nuclear weapons to get U.S./NATO forces to halt their actions if they sought to destroy Russian air defense and command and control networks.<sup>35</sup>

However, most conflicts occur below the nuclear threshold. And, deliberate escalation to nuclear use—whether it’s to tactical nuclear weapons or to an all-out strategic exchange between Russia and the United States—is a worst-case scenario. It’s more likely that Russia—if it made the deliberate choice to do so—would first seek to destabilize the Baltics through political and economic means and not by military force.<sup>36</sup> The tolerance thresholds for such coercive actions are much less clear and the resulting dynamics may also be difficult to predict.

During a conflict, in addition to deliberate escalatory pressures on both sides, there are also dangers of inadvertent or accidental escalation. These can translate a show of force into a limited war into a full-scale conventional war (and then potentially to nuclear use). Inadvertent and accidental escalation mechanics are much more difficult to control and can happen unless care is taken to buttress deterrence and manage these escalatory pressures through restraint, threshold management, and assurances. In this regard, developing a baseline of understanding of thresholds, creating restrictions on certain types of activities, supplementing these with information exchanges and enforcement mechanisms could provide a useful avenue for escalation management.

Since 2014, Moscow has provocatively operated military aircraft and anti-access/area denial systems in close proximity to U.S. forces and widely publicized these developments in state-run media organizations.<sup>37</sup> In the spring of 2014, a Russian Su-34 aircraft provocatively buzzed the USS Don Cook, an Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer.<sup>38</sup> In response to these actions, U.S. and NATO officials have expressed concerns about the implications for Western military operations, especially those conducted in close quarters with Russian forces.<sup>39</sup> Analysts have noted that Russia was using its airpower to “put pressure on risk-averse European states to change their policy toward Russia.”<sup>40</sup> But no changes were forthcoming on either side.

In the fall of 2015, Russian forces surprised observers by initiating military activities in Syria, where Western troops were already operating. Russian bombers began conducting bombing raids of targets in Syria from airfields near Latakia.<sup>41</sup> Russia’s footprint in Syria dramatically increased over the fall months, as it sought to demonstrate its conventional capabilities and electronic warfare equipment, boasting that the latter could “blind” NATO radar.<sup>42</sup> Moscow’s intervention resulted in efforts to mitigate the risks that could result from an accident or incident involving military aviation. Russia and Israel created a mechanism to deconflict their operations in Syria.<sup>43</sup> A deconfliction mechanism was also worked out with the United States.<sup>44</sup>

However, no such mechanism was developed with other NATO states operating in close proximity to Russian forces in the theater of conflict. As Russia was conducting operations in Syria, a Turkish F-16 fighter shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter aircraft that was reportedly violating Turkish airspace, killing one of its pilots.<sup>45</sup> The incident triggered a crisis in relations between Russia and Turkey that built on simmering tensions resulting from Russian military presence in Syria and its activities in close proximity to Turkish borders. This incident, a direct engagement between a NATO member state and Russia, was a far cry from the display of cooperation between Russian and Turkish air forces during CAI exercises that took place two years prior.<sup>46</sup>

Recently, a prominent task force comprised of Euro-Atlantic leaders called for a NATO-Russia agreement on “Rules of Behavior for the Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters.” This arrangement would seek to “prevent accidental incidents or miscalculations leading to an escalation of tension and even confrontation” between NATO and Russia.<sup>47</sup> It would provide a vehicle for “rules of the road” between the two sides, especially with regard to airspace incidents, and an assurance that both sides would utilize transponders.<sup>48</sup> NATO countries also sought to consult with Russia on avoiding incidents in late 2015.<sup>49</sup> As of this writing, however, this concept is yet to gain traction, especially since the NATO-Russia Council had not met for two years—until April 2016. As of this writing, Russian fighters continued to harass U.S. aircraft and vessels operating in international airspace and waters (Baltic and Black Sea) and in the Pacific.<sup>50</sup>

These examples suggest that state concerns about airspace sovereignty and vulnerability to aerial attack are becoming a more prominent dynamic in Euro-Atlantic security. Transparency and confidence-building measures focused on reducing the potential escalatory impact of close military encounters could play a vital role. However, efforts to develop new political measures need to incorporate existing airspace arrangements, discussed earlier in this brief. Moreover, despite the opportunities to reduce the coercive use of airpower, efforts to do so will not succeed until they are set in a much broader political context that incorporates the perspectives of all regional stakeholders and addresses the underlying political-military causes of potentially escalatory behaviors.

### **Dealing with Broader Euro-Atlantic Security Challenges**

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers have struggled to design Euro-Atlantic security policies to accomplish sometimes conflicting goals: Reassuring Moscow that an expanded NATO does not threaten it militarily, and integrating CEE (as well as Newly Independent States (NIS) like Georgia and Ukraine) into Western institutions and assuring them that NATO would be able to counter Russian aggression, if any.

Despite proposals to transcend the legacy deterrence arrangements between Moscow and Washington, efforts to transform the relationship between U.S./NATO and Russia, as well as achieve indivisible regional security, appear to have failed.<sup>51</sup> For example, U.S. experts disagree whether longstanding U.S.-Russian cooperation on issues such as nuclear security should trump a strong U.S./NATO response to the Ukraine crisis.<sup>52</sup> The only area of consensus appears to be that the United States and NATO do not have a comprehensive strategy for dealing with Russia.<sup>53</sup> It’s no wonder that CEE states do not feel secure, despite being integrated into Western institutions.

While the West was relatively successful in facilitating peace in the CEE during the 1990s, some observers argue that Russia’s actions in Ukraine raise questions about the wisdom of the Clinton administration’s decision to expand the Alliance.<sup>54</sup> Others warn of the dangers of expanding NATO further to the NIS, positing that “the West’s continuing insistence that the only path to stability and security in Europe is for Russia’s neighbors to be absorbed into Euro-Atlantic institutions is now begetting threats to stability and security in Europe.”<sup>55</sup>

Looking back at Euro-Atlantic airspace arrangements, it's clear that they have facilitated improvements in relations among neighboring states. However, because U.S./NATO cooperation with CEE on airspace issues moved at a faster pace than its cooperation with Russia, Moscow perceived that this cooperation could be directed against it. At the same time, Russia countered perceived challenges from U.S./NATO superiority in reconnaissance and conventional strike by building up cooperative air defense arrangements with the CIS/CSTO. The NIS states, in turn, were stuck in the middle—wanting to join the West but aware that their price of admission into Western institutions was much higher than that of their CEE counterparts.

The broader context of these issues was that all regional stakeholders were lulled into complacency by the existence of negotiated arms control agreements like the CFE and INF treaties. These treaties, however, were never updated to reflect the changing realities of Euro-Atlantic security, and no formal vision for the region's future that fully integrated Russia was proposed. Thus, while the cumulative effect of information exchanges conducted through airspace arrangements, among other cooperative measures, had a positive effect on broader Euro-Atlantic security, it also raised existing suspicions among U.S./NATO and Russia, and led to broader regional discord with regard to the NIS.

The challenge of Euro-Atlantic security is ultimately one of building institutions that can accommodate the conventional security concerns of all relevant stakeholders. The Clinton administration's choice to expand NATO sought to bring CEE into Western institutions, but not at Russia's expense.<sup>56</sup> Policy implementation, however, is messy. And while expanding NATO worked for some time, this approach had the unintended consequence of weakening legal frameworks on the use of force in the region and institutional structures like the OSCE that were inclusive of all Euro-Atlantic stakeholders. In turn, U.S. diplomacy and security guarantees via the spread of missile defense infrastructure in Europe began to supplant past cooperative security approaches in the Euro-Atlantic, including the CFE and the INF.

In light of the crisis in Ukraine, key Euro-Atlantic countries have engaged in soul searching. And, in November 2015, an OSCE Eminent Persons panel released a report that started a discussion about the broader regional security challenges.<sup>57</sup> The report laid out narratives on the origins of the current security situation from three perspectives, including “the West,” Russia, and “states in-between,” beginning at the end of the Cold War. The report noted that:

“[These three narratives are] often in opposition to each other; and, in the case of the long versions, most do not accept any of them as an accurate or adequate way of describing their perspective on what happened. The point, however, is not historical accuracy but to illustrate how much our appreciation of the recent past diverges. These diametrically opposed narratives are a fact that, for the moment, we have to live with. While it should not prevent us from working together, it ought to help us realize how difficult that is.”<sup>58</sup>

By looking at cooperation through airspace arrangements among multiple stakeholders in the Euro-Atlantic region, this brief attempted to do just that—highlight the points of convergence and divergence between the narratives in Moscow, the West, and in the NIS and CEE, and appreciate the difficulty of cooperation. As the OSCE panel noted, however, “stamina” and “patience” will be important in the urgent endeavor of replacing “mutual recrimination” with “rebuilding trust.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, chasing away the clouds of suspicion that have built up in Euro-

Atlantic airspace over the last twenty five years will take creative and sustained efforts on behalf of policy makers all across the region.

### **About the author**

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## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> "SAS Flight in Russian Spy Plane Near Miss," *The Local*, May 8, 2014, <http://www.thelocal.se/20140508/sas-plane-in-russian-spy-plane-near-miss>.
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