CERI Working group
« Diplomacy, the military and the spy »

Seminar held on February 3, 2021:

« The Defense and the Intelligence in Russia's Power Projection: Who is in Control? », with Prof. Katarzyna Zysk, Deputy Director and the Head of the Centre for Security Policy, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, Oslo, Norway.

On February 3, 2021, the CERI working group on diplomacy, military and intelligence studies, supported by the Centre d'Analyse, de Prévision et de Stratégie (CAPS) of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met to discuss the role of defense and intelligence setups within Russia's strategy of power projection. Prof. Dr. Katarzyna Zysk (hereafter Prof. Zysk), Deputy Director and the Head of the Centre for Security Policy at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies in Oslo, participated as the keynote speaker to this meeting.

Prior to her current role, Prof. Zysk was a visiting scholar at the Centre for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University and a visiting research fellow at the Changing Character of War Centre at the University of Oxford, as well as research fellow at the Centre for Naval Warfare Studies at the US Naval War College.

In her address to the working group, Prof. Zysk has heavily drawn on her extensive study of Russia's military doctrine and strategy, modernisation of the Russian armed forces, and geopolitics with special emphasis on maritime security and naval affairs.

I. Prof. Zysk's address

The speaker's opening remarks outlined the broad outline of her subsequent remarks centered around what she sees as three main pillars of Russian defence, deterrence and coercive options. i.e. the nuclear, 2) non-nuclear, and 3) non-military methods and means. She noted that the Russian strategic deterrence system, which was formally introduced in the Russian military doctrine of 2014, is to be implemented both in peacetime and in conflict with a flexible use of the full spectrum of available means, ranging from military (nuclear (strategic and non-strategic) and non-nuclear (strategic and general purpose forces) as well as a broad spectrum of non-military measures and means.

This report shall now consider each pillar in turn.

A. Nuclear defence, deterrence and coercive options

Within the first pillar, Prof. Zysk considered the role of nuclear weapons, which remain at the very core of the Russian military doctrine and strategy, despite a significant progress in modernization of Russian conventional forces over the past decade. She noted that Russia perceives itself to be generally weaker than most of its main rivals in terms of conventional capabilities. Nuclear weapons are still considered to be critical to deter a large-scale aggression against Russia.

Prof. Zysk noted the Russian MoD defines the aims of strategic deterrence as "to prevent escalation, or to de-escalate or end the military conflict as soon as possible, on conditions favorable to Russian, including with single nuclear strikes, up to a stage with a massive use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction." She argued therefore that nuclear weapons are seen not only as the means for a decisive defeat of the enemy, but also as the means to avoid an uncontrollable nuclear escalation. The Russian "deterrence" means therefore both preventing conflict as well as de-escalating it once it has occurred in conditions favorable to Russia's national interests.

The fundamental role of nuclear weapons in the Russian military doctrine has been supported by the expanding nuclear arsenal, their continuing modernization and fielding of increasingly diverse and expanding capabilities, their delivery systems and supporting infrastructure, which Prof. Zysk elaborated on. She observed that many of the key projects are long-term investments, and thus likely to remain a central part of the Russian military strategy for the foreseeable future.

B. Non-nuclear defence, deterrence and coercive options

Prof. Zysk argued that as large-scale modernisation has started delivering results, the role of non-nuclear capabilities in Russian power projection has been growing as a result. Non-nuclear defense and deterrence encompasses all non-nuclear capabilities, but an asset that is particularly highly valued by Russia are long range precision weapons on ballistic and cruise missiles. Russia has been developing them since the 1980s, but the pace of their production and deployment has increased significantly first after 2010. The arsenal includes the ground-launched Iskander (short-range), the sea-based Kalibr (medium-range) and the air-launched KH-101 (long-range) missiles delivered from strategic bombers, allowing Russia a range of approx. 500 - 4000 kilometres. Given the ranges, Russia can engage land targets across Europe and large parts of Asia from international waters or the Russian airspace. In addition, the arsenal is being strengthened with hypersonic missiles and glide vehicles. Despite this progress, Prof. Zysk urged caution in analysing Russia's modernisation or its capabilities going forward. She noted that certain capabilities of hypersonic weapons could be overestimated, but observed that, nonetheless, defence against them may still be prohibitively high, which in turn may increase the likelihood of offence dominance in a conventional strike. This may create problems of crisis instability and arms-race instability. In addition, all the Russian long-range precision weapons are developed as dual-capable, able to carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. This raises a significant identification challenge for Russia's adversaries given that it will be normally hard to assess what kind of warhead a missile is carrying until the impact. It can increase uncertainty on the adversary's side and thus strengthen Russia's deterrence, providing additional options in escalation management. However, she noted that combined with short reaction time, unpredictable behavior of some of these missiles, it may have a potentially highly destabilising and escalatory effect given that an adversary may assume that it is under nuclear attack and respond accordingly.

Another central capability, toward which Prof. Zysk directed the attention of the working group was the importance the Russian General Staff attaches to winning and holding information

superiority in a conflict. Hence, Russia has been investing in counter network capabilities that could disrupt or degrade the backbone of the US and NATO's information technology-enabled warfare, including communications, space-based systems such satellites, command and operational networks and other critical technological networks that developed countries depend on. She further elaborated on advantages and disadvantages of use of such capabilities in some war scenarios.

C. Non-military methods and means

Prof. Zysk subsequently considered the role of intelligence services not least as a part of the third pillar of the Russian power projection. Prof. Zysk opened this part by informing the working group of Russia's definition of contemporary conflict as an integrated employment of military force with political, economic, informational and other non-military methods and means. She observed that while the Russian armed forces have been significantly strengthened, Russia still sees a significant military-technological asymmetry between its own capacities vis-à-vis those of other major military powers. Therefore, asymmetric and indirect are key to bypass or undermine opponents' strengths and exploit vulnerabilities. Among the broad spectrum of means is what we in the West often call information warfare and what Russia calls "information confrontation". Contrary to the Western definition, Prof. Zysk pointed out, which understands information warfare as limited information operations conducted during hostilities, the Russian approach is much more expansive and not limited to wartime, but rather conducted along the full conflict continuum. The speaker noted that Russia also applies elements of informational warfare regardless of its relations with the target state or organisation.

Noting the role of intelligence services, Prof. Zysk proceeded to illustrate the intelligence architecture in Russia, composed of four main bodies: The Federal Security Service (FSB) - mostly focused on domestic security, counter-intelligence and intel gathering in post-Soviet countries. The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) - entrusted with collecting intelligence abroad. The Federal Protective Service (FSO) - responsible for protecting President Vladimir Putin and other high-ranking officials, federal properties. All the three are direct successors of the KGB and report directly to Putin.

In addition, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GU, broadly known under the old name GRU) is Russia's largest foreign intelligence agency, subordinated to the Russian Ministry of Defence. Prof. Zysk noted that GRU is an expansive organization responsible for all levels of military intelligence, from tactical to strategic. It also commands Spetsnaz brigades (special forces), which conduct such operations as battlefield reconnaissance, raiding, sabotage, and control of local proxies. GRU also does traditional intel missions such as human and signal intelligence, in addition to extensive disinformation, propaganda, cyber operations, and exterritorial assassinations.

Prof. Zysk noted that GRU has made itself known to the broader Western public in recent years in a number of exposed successes and a series of failed operations.

For instance, it demonstrated significant capability during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, providing key intelligence and Spetsnaz forces to conduct the operations. They were further continued in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in the eastern Ukraine, where GRU helped organize, train, and supervise local proxy forces. These kinds of operations were also employed in Syria where GRU proved instrumental in conducting battlefield reconnaissance for Russia's air operations, as well as training and coordinating air strikes with the Syrian government forces. GRU has also made its name known for various exposed active measures in Europe and the US,

including disinformation campaigns and interference in electoral processes; an attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016, which aimed to overthrow and replace a pro-Western prime minister, likely to prevent the country from joining NATO; the poisoning of the former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in UK in 2018, with the use of the infamous military grade nerve agent Novichok. Prof. Zysk also noted that there is a long list of cyberattacks by GRU such as those aimed to interfere with the investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons into the use of chemical weapons in Syria, or into the poisoning of Skripal; cyberattacks against officials from the World Anti-Doping Agency investigating the Russian doping scandal, or cyberattacks against officials investigating the Russian downing of the passenger plane NH17 in Ukraine in 2014. The list is longer and continues to grow.

Analysing some of the GRU failures, Prof. Zysk observed that some findings suggest they could be not as much a result of the incompetence of the GRU, but rather they an outcome of a competition between the various Russian security agencies. They do compete with each other for responsibilities and thus resources, budgets and influence. For instance, the FSB has sought to get a greater role in international operations, which reportedly has caused friction with the GRU and SVR, given it is their primary area of responsibility. The elite antiterrorist unit of the FSB "Vympel" was reportedly responsible for the assassination of the former Chechen military commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin in 2019.

Prof. Zysk observed that these competitions are hard to prove with a high level of certainty. What is clear, however, is that many of the failed and exposed operations turned damaging to Russia's interests. In some cases, the important aspect of maintaining plausible deniability was eliminated and seriously complicated Russia's relations with several important countries. Hence, these operations turned out politically expensive and damaged the image of both the Russian intelligence service and the Russian state.

Questions and comments

The first topic considered by the working group was the evolution of Russian power projection from the Cold War era to the present day. In this regard, Prof. Zysk observed that Soviet-era methods and means continue to heavily influence Russian power projection. She noted a strong influence of both Soviet and Tsarist strategic tradition in contemporary Russian strategic thinking. Among examples, she pointed that Russian military leaders occupying key positions have been keen students of Soviet military history and theory. At the same time, she noted that many of the traditional methods and means are being creatively adapted to the contemporary environment, including new technological opportunities, forms and means of information and social interactions. Among examples, she cited the use of propaganda, which has remained an important and influential feature of the Russian power projection. Prof. Zysk observed that Russia has also a vested interest and resources in new and potentially disruptive technologies, including AI and quantum computing, big data, automated decision-making, and human-machine hybrid intelligence, and others, which are likely to play an increasingly important role.

The working group then considered if some Russian actions made deliberate use of implausible deniability, with the objective of sending political and other signals. Prof. Zysk agreed that some of the operations could be designed to have a particular signal effect both domestically and toward external actors. Referring back to the failed poisoning of Sergei Skripal, she noted that several aspects about these operations raised red flags, such as the use of Novichok to kill, which could be traced back to the Russian state.

The speaker was then asked about Russia's ability to destabilise other actors at a low cost, and if she knew who the primary targets likely were. She acknowledged that Russia's objective was in some cases to destabilise as well as to seek to influence towards a pro-Russian point of view.

The working group then considered Russia's relationship with China, as well as Russia's role within the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). On the latter, Prof. Zysk emphasised the dominant role of Russia in CSTO. 85 percent of CSTO troops come from Russia. Russia does not really expect valuable military support from the other organization members given the generally poor quality of the troops and various domestic problems. Still although it does not appear to be a real military alliance, it provides Russia a tool for military integration and influence in the region. For instance, it helps to justify Russian bases in other states in Central Asia, while at the same time posing constraints on non-CSTO member bases in the region, given that Russia has de facto veto rights.

Regarding China, Prof. Zysk was quick to highlight that Moscow remains keenly aware of the large economic and development trajectory disparities between the two countries. She discussed the qualitative change in the cooperation since 2014 in particular, including in the military field, but also remaining security and military concerns in Russia about China's future. She has referred to the ongoing debate in academic and policy circles about Russia's approach towards China being reminiscent of a short-term pragmatic relationship and longer-term rivalry.

Asked about the role of Russian diplomats in the formation and execution of power projection, Prof. Zysk noted that it was subordinate in nature but still a crucial tool, often wielded by the Russian authorities with a high efficiency.

The speaker was then asked about the differences between Russian and Soviet strategies outside of technological aspects, as well as priority areas for NATO to limit Russian influence. Prof. Zysk observed that Russia has directed a strong focus on improving the level of coordination between various government entities involved in the Russian power projection. Furthermore, Russia has studied strengths and vulnerabilities of Western societies, and has developed concepts and capabilities that aim to exploit that knowledge in practice with a broad spectrum of military and non-military tools.

On NATO's strategy toward Russia, Prof. Zysk noted that Western sanctions have hurt Russia more than Russia has officially admitted. She further observed that it is necessary to step up the military and civilian cooperation and coordination along the military-non-military spectrum in order to increase the ability to swiftly identify, avert and respond to Russia's flexible and adaptable strategy.

The speaker was then asked about the Russian reaction to recent initiatives by France regarding the desire for a greater strategic autonomy from NATO. She argued that it depends what the actual result of this process would be: a more militarily capable Europe is not in Russia's interest, but Russia would welcome a decoupling of the US and European security. Indeed, limiting the role of the United States in the international system in general, and in Europe in particular, has been one of Russia's long-standing strategic objectives aimed to allow Russia to extend its influence in Europe.

Lastly, the speaker was asked about possible weaknesses within the Russian military and political system. She mentioned that the list is long and pointed at such issues as structural

problems in parts of the Russian domestic defence industry, not least surface shipbuilding; low labour productivity in state-owned industries and companies; the tendency to develop several different versions of the same type of weapon, creating logistical and maintenance struggles; deficiencies in transport capacity and logistics; insufficient C2ISTAR infrastructure; or challenges with recruiting and retaining military personnel. She acknowledged a number of strengths of the political system, such as in some cases a rapid decision-making process or ability to quickly implement lessons-learned from the battlefield in Ukraine and especially Syria. These strengths are, nonetheless, a double-edged sword as the political system also constitutes a breeding ground for structural problems including pervasive corruption, red tape, heavy bureaucratic control, and generally low-level innovation economy. Hence, there are well-justified questions about Russia's ability to sustain the high level of military activity and a direct and indirect confrontation, especially in the long-term. Still, Prof. Zysk pointed out that the military field is one of few areas where Russia can play at the high international level and be a member of the great powers club. This may provide important incentives to maintain the strong focus and investments in the armed forces.