



NATO in Ukraine: What Moscow saw

By Rachel Douglas

In recent years, Russian warnings against the Western powers crossing its national security “red lines” were usually discussed abroad in terms of NATO’s further eastward expansion, especially the possibility of granting NATO membership or a Membership Action Plan to Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin warned twice in 2021, that Ukraine’s NATO membership was not the only criterion. “I hope that no one will think about crossing a ‘red line’ with regard to Russia”, he said in his 21 April 2021 Message to the Federal Assembly. “We ourselves will determine in each specific case where it will be drawn” (“Russia’s ‘red lines’: Don’t dismiss as bluff or bluster”, AAS, 5 May 2021).

In October 2021 Putin said about Ukraine to a conference of the Valdai Discussion Club, an audience of foreign and Russian think tankers and journalists: “Formal membership in NATO ultimately may not happen, but the military development of the territory is already under way.” The top announced goal of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine is to “demilitarise” the country, meaning to destroy these facilities, which the USA and NATO had refused to discuss in negotiations over Russia’s demands for written security guarantees.

Since many are unaware of that “military development”, the Documentation on the next page excerpts Putin’s speech of 21 Feb. 2022, three days before Russian forces moved into Ukraine. He gave a detailed account of the NATO presence in Ukraine as Moscow saw it—with personnel, military infrastructure, and a rotation of NATO forces for joint land and sea exercises with Ukrainian forces throughout the year—in the setting of official, published US military documents that define Russia as an adversary and discuss options for pre-emptive strikes on an adversary’s nuclear weapons.

In June 2020 Ukraine was granted NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner status. (Australia is an EOP, too.) The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence explained: “NATO ... is increasing its influence on the security situation in regions which are remote from the Alliance’s borders, increasing the number of forces and assets of partners compatible with NATO military formations that can be involved in Alliance operations, as well as providing logistical and other types of support for NATO troops (forces) in the territory of the country with EOP status.... Ukraine will be able to participate in the planning of NATO operations; gain access to all NATO exercises; representatives of Ukraine will be able to hold positions at NATO headquarters and command structures”.

The United States and the UK, the leading NATO countries, have each had their own Armed Forces personnel in Ukraine for training Kiev’s Armed Forces for many years. Several hundred British troops in the UK’s Operation ORBITAL, launched in 2015, had trained more than 18,000 Ukrainians in medical care, logistics, and weapons techniques by 2018. In August 2020, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace inaugurated a Maritime Training Initiative, which was seen in action in June 2021 in the HMS *Defender*’s transit of Russian waters in the Black Sea (“UK-led Black Sea provocations: ‘Global Britain’ in action”, AAS, 28 July 2021).

John Helmer, the Australian-born, Moscow-based journalist who blogs at johnhelmer.net, posted his translation of

a Russian press article about these developments 2 March, under the headline “Operation Barbarossa in slow motion—the offensive capacity the US was preparing in Ukraine until last week” (the article includes several maps). Operation Barbarossa was the code-name of Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union. Helmer wrote in an introduction, “The US has been installing American-directed military bases in the Ukraine for stockpiling advanced weapons to strike Russia by land, sea, and air. In these plans for attack deep across the Russian frontier, Ukraine was already a platform with the potential for nuclear battlefield operations without formal admission to NATO; without acceptance by the NATO member states; without comprehension or vote of approval by the Ukrainians themselves.”

NATO capabilities in the current fighting

Officials of Russia and the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR—one of the two self-proclaimed republics in eastern Ukraine, now recognised by Russia) have announced the discovery of evidence of NATO’s hands-on involvement in the current fighting. On 6 March DPR leader Denis Pushilin stated that a laptop captured from the Azov Battalion near Mariupol, a hotly contested port in Donetsk Region on the Sea of Azov, had NATO identification labels. Mariupol is headquarters of Azov, a fascist-led component of Ukraine’s National Guard. Yuri Podolyaka, a Ukrainian military analyst living in exile in Russia, observed in video commentary that Azov and other Ukrainian forces may be getting real-time NATO signals intelligence data on Russian Air Force movements, enabling Ukrainian ground forces to evade Russian air superiority.

On 9 March Ukraine Ministry of Defence spokesman Gen.-Maj. Igor Konashenkov said that the Ukrainian Armed Forces command was trying to compensate for its lack of information on the situation in the air, by receiving data from the NATO E3-A AWACS flying round-the-clock in Polish air space.

Several of the facilities listed by Putin on 21 February (see Documentation) were destroyed by missile strikes in the first hours of combat on 24 February, including the Ochakov Maritime Operations Centre on the Black Sea. On 13 March Russia carried out a long-range air strike that demolished the Yavoriv military base in far western Ukraine near the Polish border, used by the USA for training and currently as a transshipment point for weapons and volunteer fighters into Ukraine from European NATO countries.

Fighting continues on the ground, while Russian and Ukrainian delegations have been meeting frequently—daily by video, in recent days—on terms for a halt to the war. Some key NATO countries seek a dangerous escalation. Poland has sought to transfer its Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, most of whose own planes were wiped out by Russia in late February. The US Department of Defence called the scheme to hand over the MiG-29s to the Americans for transfer to Ukraine “untenable” but Secretary of State Antony Blinken talked about giving it a “green light”. The UK’s Ben Wallace was on board, saying “I would support the Poles and whatever choice they make”.

Konashenkov warned 6 March against a closely related scenario. He said that some planes from Ukraine’s

depleted Air Force had been flown to Romania (a NATO member) and other countries bordering Ukraine—Poland likely being one of them. “The use of those countries’ airfields for basing combat aircraft subsequently used against the Russian Armed Forces may be assessed as involvement by these countries in the armed conflict”, he said.

Poland, often working in close connection with the UK, has been instrumental in NATO expansion since 1992.

In a 5 March talk with Russian civil aviation personnel, Putin confirmed that his order of 27 February to place Russia’s deterrent forces, its nuclear missiles, on a heightened alert status had been prompted by UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss’s blurring out that she expected NATO to be drawn into the conflict with Russia.

DOCUMENTATION: Putin on NATO

Following are excerpts from Russian President Vladimir Putin’s address to the nation on 21 February 2022. Source: Kremlin.ru.

In March 2021, a new Military Strategy was adopted in Ukraine. This document is almost entirely dedicated to confrontation with Russia and sets the goal of involving foreign states in a conflict with our country. The strategy stipulates the organisation of what can be described as a terrorist underground movement in Russia’s Crimea and in Donbas. It also sets out the contours of a potential war, which should end, according to the Kiev strategists, “with the assistance of the international community on favourable terms for Ukraine”, as well as—listen carefully, please—“with foreign military support in the geopolitical confrontation with the Russian Federation.” In fact, this is nothing other than preparation for hostilities against our country, Russia.

It has already been stated today that Ukraine intends to create its own nuclear weapons, and this is not just bragging. Ukraine has the nuclear technologies created back in the Soviet times and delivery vehicles for such weapons, including aircraft, as well as the Soviet-designed Tochka-U precision tactical missiles with a range of over 100 kilometres....

If Ukraine acquires weapons of mass destruction, the situation in the world and in Europe will drastically change, especially for us, for Russia. We cannot but react to this real danger, all the more so since, let me repeat, Ukraine’s Western patrons may help it acquire these weapons to create yet another threat to our country. We are seeing how persistently the Kiev regime is being pumped with arms. Since 2014, the United States alone has spent billions of dollars for this purpose, including supplies of arms and equipment and training of specialists. In the last few months, there has been a constant flow of Western weapons to Ukraine.... Foreign advisors supervise the activities of Ukraine’s armed forces and special services and we are well aware of this.

Over the past few years, military contingents of NATO countries have been almost constantly present on Ukrainian territory under the pretext of exercises. The Ukrainian troop control system has already been integrated into NATO. This means that NATO headquarters can issue direct commands to the Ukrainian armed forces, even to their separate units and squads.

The United States and NATO have started an impudent development of Ukrainian territory as a theatre of potential military operations.... Last year alone, over 23,000 troops and more than a thousand units of hardware were involved.... This year, at least ten of these joint drills are

planned.

Obviously, such undertakings are designed as a cover for a rapid build-up of the NATO military group on Ukrainian territory. The network of airfields upgraded with US help in Borispol, Ivano-Frankovsk, Chuguyev and Odesa, to name a few, is capable of transferring army units in a very short time. Ukraine’s airspace is open to flights by US strategic and reconnaissance aircraft and drones that conduct surveillance over Russian territory.

The US-built Maritime Operations Centre in Ochakov makes it possible to support activity by NATO warships, including the use of precision weapons, against the Russian Black Sea Fleet and our infrastructure on the entire Black Sea Coast....

Article 17 of the Constitution of Ukraine stipulates that deploying foreign military bases on its territory is illegal. However, as it turns out, this is just a conventionality that can be easily circumvented. Ukraine is home to NATO training missions which are, in fact, foreign military bases....

The situation continues to deteriorate, including in the strategic area. Thus, positioning areas for interceptor missiles are being established in Romania and Poland as part of the US project to create a global missile defence system. It is common knowledge that the launchers deployed there can be used for Tomahawk cruise missiles—offensive strike systems. In addition, the United States is developing its all-purpose Standard Missile-6, which can provide air and missile defence, as well as strike ground and surface targets. In other words, the allegedly defensive US missile defence system is developing and expanding its new offensive capabilities.

The information we have gives us good reason to believe that Ukraine’s accession to NATO and the subsequent deployment of NATO facilities has already been decided and is only a matter of time. We clearly understand that given this scenario, the level of military threats to Russia will increase dramatically, several times over. And I would like to emphasise at this point that the risk of a sudden strike at our country will multiply.... American strategic planning documents confirm the possibility of a so-called pre-emptive strike at enemy missile systems. We also know the main adversary of the United States and NATO. It is Russia. NATO documents officially declare our country to be the main threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Ukraine will serve as an advanced bridgehead for such a strike....

Many Ukrainian airfields are located not far from our borders. NATO’s tactical aviation deployed there, including precision weapon carriers, will be capable of striking at our territory to the depth of the Volgograd-Kazan-Samara-Astrakhan line. Deployment of reconnaissance radars on Ukrainian territory will allow NATO to tightly control Russia’s airspace up to the Urals.

Finally, after the US destroyed the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Pentagon has been openly developing many land-based attack weapons, including ballistic missiles capable of hitting targets at a distance of up to 5,500 km. If deployed in Ukraine, such systems will be able to hit targets in Russia’s entire European part. The flying time of Tomahawk cruise missiles to Moscow will be less than 35 minutes; ballistic missiles from Kharkov will take seven to eight minutes; and hypersonic assault weapons, four to five minutes. It is like a knife to the throat. I have no doubt that they hope to carry out these plans, as they did many times in the past, expanding NATO eastward, moving their military infrastructure to Russian borders and fully ignoring our concerns, protests and warnings.