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Misplaced Certainty: NATO Hostility as Collective Common Sense Within Russia's Leadership

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Our study of official Russian statements on NATO between 2014 and 2021 (Wilhelmsen and Hjermann 2022) has shown that Russian discourse entrenched an understanding of NATO as hostile, deceptive and constantly engaged in waging hybrid warfare against Russia. In effect, the rhetoric left no room for Russia viewing any NATO action as defensive. That such a false sense of certainty is conducive to military conflict, as shown in Russia's war on Ukraine, can be understood through a constructivist reading of the 'security dilemma'.

In its classic formulation by Jervis (1978), the 'security dilemma' explains how defensive measures can lead to unintended consequences and unwanted conflict, in which steps intended to increase security have the opposite effect. While this defensive realist version sees the security dilemma as rooted in *uncertainty as lack of information*, a constructivist reading sees social reality as intersubjectively constituted, and *uncertainty as a matter of interpretation*: states come to know each other as defensive or hostile through social, discursive and processual interaction, leaving political entities with very limited control over how their actions are interpreted (Mitzen 2006). In reading their adversaries' actions, political actors may *discount* the uncertainty involved in making interpretations, and arrive at a 'misplaced certainty' (Mitzen and Schweller 2011), creating a particularly acute 'securitisation dilemma' (Van Rythoven 2020). We build on this scholarship to argue that intense and repeated political agitation that depicts the Other as threatening misleads actors to discount uncertainty, fostering the epistemological hubris that they 'know' their adversaries. Russian official rhetoric after 2014 appears to have fostered such hubris (Wilhelmsen and Hjermann 2022).

In the years leading up to its full-scale war in Ukraine, the Russian leadership cultivated a 'conspiracy theory', victimising Russia as the target of an incessant geopolitical expansion drive by the USA/ NATO. The events of 24 February 2022 have clearly shown that Putin's Russia is a ruthless aggressor, but the Moscow's repeated narrative of being under attack from NATO has, we find, reinforced the perceived certainty of a hostile environment that paved the way for the 2022 re-invasion of Ukraine.

In this study, we conducted a discursive reading of 156 official documents from the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in the period 2014–2021, taking MFA and MOD texts as a reflection of what we see as collective interpretation of NATO actions in the Russian security policy leadership. Our in-depth reading of several years' flow of documents, informed by poststructuralist discourse analysis techniques, showed how official speech changed, and how representations of NATO as hostile became naturalised. We find that six 'certainties' about NATO became entrenched as common sense within the Russian security policy leadership after 2014:

1: **'The West' is essentially a single actor: Washington, D.C.** –The Russian discourse merges different Western actors into a single, threatening actor. 'NATO', 'USA' and the 'West' are often used interchangeably and explicitly deemed identical in Russian statements (for example, 'saying NATO, you understand the USA').^[1] This has the effect of transferring the danger and hostility perceived in one of the actors to the others.

2: **USA/NATO has created a world of instability and insecurity** –'Like lava from a volcano, demolishing on its

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way everything positive, accumulated over the past decade, Western countries are creating new dividing lines ... the international security system has been undermined by the actions of the US and its allies.'[2] This MOD quote from May 2014 reflects a view that permeates Russian official texts: that NATO/US actions and arrogance have destabilised the international situation; order may be replaced by chaos at any time. Here, Russia is represented as a champion of the opposite; a world with a 'balance of interests and compromises' rather than 'force and aggression', standing for a pragmatism it hopes will permeate the NATO system.[3]

3: USA/NATO is hostile and deceptive by nature –Russian rhetoric presents the modus operandi of the USA and NATO as built on deception, double-dealing, and false pretexts. USA/NATO are construed as artificially stirring up crises and instability to its own advantage, based on NATO's 'genetic code'[4] and ruthless drive for geopolitical expansion. The Russian leadership holds that the USA/NATO can never be trusted: NATO says one thing and does the opposite. In our reading, Russian rhetoric nurtures a conspiracy theory whereby NATO is the vehicle in an anti-Russia plot in which the USA pulls all the strings.

4: NATO has an extensive toolkit for its hybrid war on Russia –The Russian rhetoric also outlines a specifically Western form of warfare which reinforces the image of NATO's hostile nature. In particular, NATO/USA/West is presented as relying on an overarching strategy of instigating 'colour revolutions': imposing self-serving policies on other countries under the guise of spreading democracy, and using propaganda and instrumentalising socio-economic grievances to stir up unrest in ways that serve the West and harm Russia. This, together with the military might of NATO, make the West so dangerous in Moscow's depiction of world affairs.

5: NATO became increasingly dangerous after 2014 – Since Russia's war on Ukraine from 2014, NATO is seen as expanding its activities on the European continent. This is reflected in Russian discourse through repeated statements on the hostile intent of NATO/US/West. New military exercises, installations and troop deployments, as well as pre-Crimea NATO activities, are framed and linked into a chain of hostile acts committed by NATO, and NATO hostility is increasingly naturalised in the rhetoric. NATO is seen as being on an 'open course' towards 'military-political "containment" of Russia': stability in Europe has become a thing of the past.[5] As new events unfold, the Russian leadership's rhetoric amasses further 'evidence' for this 'open' course of hostility, such as the 2019 US withdrawal from the INF Treaty and the fact that NATO's strategic documents depict Russia as a military threat.

6: NATO's hostile actions are spreading to previously 'cooperative' spaces – While the depiction of the Arctic as a 'uniquely collaborative' space is retained by the Russian leadership, NATO as an actor is never mentioned in non-hostile terms. Overall, Moscow's reading of NATO as hostile and driven by the will to geopolitical expansion seems to have spread to its interpretation of NATO actions in the Arctic. For example, the Russian MFA has noted that 'the activities of the NATO member states in the Arctic region are increasingly becoming systemic and provocative, thus transforming the Arctic into a ground of geopolitical competition'.^[6]

These six elements have been developed within the Russian leadership as certainties about NATO, ruling out any ideas that the treaty organisation might not be eternally hostile everywhere. As this misplaced certainty (Mitzen and Schweller 2011) of hostile NATO intent gradually became entrenched, Russia's willingness to view the world in terms of one big 'Russophobic' conspiracy theory precluded political alternatives to what Russia deems 'defensive' measures. This conspiratorial common sense of omnipresent NATO hostility was an important precondition of Russia's massive escalation of its war on Ukraine from February 2022.

References

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Notes

[1] Russian MFA, 4 February 2016. https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1522112/. Accessed 3 Oct 2023.

[2] Russian MOD, 05 March 2015. https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12009584@egNews. Accessed 3 Oct 2023.

[3] Russian MOD, 16 April 2015. https://function.mil.ru/news_page/person/more.htm?id=12016239@egNews. Accessed 3 Oct 2023.

[4] Russian MFA, 5 Sept 2023. <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1645859/>. Accessed 3 Oct 2023.

[5] Russian MFA, 19 April 2016. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1527198/. Accessed 3 Oct 2023.

[6] Russian MFA, 11 March 2021. https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/nedostovernie-publikacii/-/asset_publisher/nTzOQTrrCFd0/content/id/4616530. Accessed 3 Oct 2023.

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