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Interview - Katarzyna Zysk

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Dr. Katarzyna Zysk is Associate Professor at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies in Oslo, a position she has held since 2007. In the academic year 2016–2017, she is a visiting scholar at the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University, and later a visiting fellow at Oxford University. She is also a member of the Hoover Institution's Arctic Security Initiative at Stanford University. Katarzyna has an academic background in international relations and international history. Her research has focused on various aspects of security and strategic studies, in particular Russia's policies around military change and modernization of the Russian armed forces, strategic culture, political philosophy, Arctic geopolitics, as well as uses of seapower and regional stability. Her most recent publications include *Managing Military Change in Russia*, *Maritime Security and International Order at Sea in the Arctic*, and *The New Normal: Russia to Increase Northern European Naval Operations*. For full list of publications, see [here](#).

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

There are a lot of fascinating and original projects underway, including here at CISAC. Among the developments I am particularly interested in is the way in which the increasingly wired world is profoundly changing the nature and character of war – with the impact of new technologies, forms and roles of information and social interactions; similar considerations concern such key concepts as strategic deterrence. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches that lead to and foster original perspectives on various international security issues are an exciting development. Likewise, there is a great value in drawing from history in novel ways, particularly in the form of comparative historical case studies.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Among my founding experiences was one of the biggest watersheds in history: that is the breakdown of the eastern block that started in 1989. From the perspective of someone who grew up on the other side of the Iron Curtain, it was a radical experience when sweeping changes on the macro-political, economic, social and cultural levels profoundly impacted all aspects of life. It seemed as if the reality we lived in turned out to be like a paper decoration, which simply dissolved overnight. Whilst it was one of the greatest fortunes of the 20th century, the experience taught me not to take political and social systems for granted. I believe reality, which we used to think was 'solid' forever, is far more fragile and vulnerable than we would like to think.

Another important aspect of this transformation – which had impacted my interest in security issues – was related to the changes that entered schools and academia at that time. One of the disciplines that became 'unrestrained' was history. At last, historians were able to speak freely – and speak passionately – about political and security related events, which strictly controlled censorship previously prohibited. I was lucky to have one of these passionate teachers. Even though I was primarily focused on art at that time, I was very much drawn to history lessons as well, in particular contemporary history – which was a sensitive issue under the communist rule – such as the events in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s. This includes the introduction of martial law, which left many casualties and turned many lives upside down. What was special about these history lessons at that particular time was the realization that national and international security events were not some abstract concepts; we could feel their impact on our own

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skin, or see their direct and indirect effects on lives of people we knew. The understanding of security as something very real, that affects us directly, inspired my interest in intentional security early on, and ultimately led me to the place I am in right now professionally.

What is your take on Russia's 'New Generation Warfare', especially its non-military rather than military devices?

The New Generation Warfare (NGW) is Russia's adaptation to the changing character of war. The NGW is one of the many names given to the contemporary Russian methods and means of warfare, in which the use of a broad spectrum of non-military tools occupies a central place. As the Chief of the General Staff, gen. Valerii Gerasimov, stated in his 2013 article "noncombat methods and means of achieving political goals surpass military actions by a ratio 4:1". These include economic and political levers, cyber attacks, electronic warfare, massive propaganda and disinformation campaigns, psychological operations, as well as using the potential of population protest, among a spectrum of other means. One of the central aspects of the concept is circumventing the adversary's strengths, i.e. Western military-technological superiority, and exploiting the adversary's weaknesses in a cost-effective manner. Targeting the public opinion for instance, which is central in democracies to the decision-making process, seems only logical. One of the basic goals is to weaken the adversary from within through such measures as undermining the political cohesion of the state and its institutions, while simultaneously operating under the adversary's 'red lines' (e.g. the Article 5 threshold). Russia believes these ways and means may achieve political goals without carrying out military operations, or they may facilitate and prepare the ground for a successful military intervention should it be needed.

The explicit emphasis on a non-military, indirect and asymmetric approach does not undermine, however, the importance of a strong military force. Indeed, military superiority remains the key component of the NGW, as it plays a central role in a successful implementation of non-military tools by providing deterrence and enabling coercion. Hence, the NGW is based on flexibility and creative use of all available tools to the state power of which can be employed depending on the opportunities that arise and on what is judged to be the most suitable, effective and affordable in a given situation – be it a cyber attack, destabilizing information campaigns and psychological operations combined with economic incentives, covert special operations, or a direct military intervention.

In your lecture at Kings College London last year, you reflected on the characteristics of Russia's modernization across its defense system. How do you think a Trump presidency will influence military modernization in Russia?

Russia is determined to continue military modernization no matter who the president of the United States is and how the US–Russia relations develop. In theory, a significant boost in the US defense spending, as Donald Trump has promised, could pressure Russia to speed up military build-up. But Trump has obviously a history of bluster and it is hard to take such statements for granted until we see an action. However, even if it were the case, Russia could hardly afford to enter a military race.

Russian defense spending has systematically increased since the early 2000s, but the country has been struggling with financing the military and other ambitions due to economic recession spurred by low oil prices, several rounds of Western sanctions and Russian countersanctions, weakening value of the ruble and high inflation, among other problems. According to the IMF, the Russian economy contracted by 3.7 % in 2015. The defense budget was cut that year, contributing to delays and postponement of some of the defense investments and programs. However, the Russian economy is expected to slightly rebound in 2017 and the political leadership is highly motivated to continue prioritizing the defense sector, even at the expense of, for example, welfare, healthcare and education. Indeed, Russia has made significant progress in implementing the State Armament Programme (2011–2020), despite the economic hurdles and other structural challenges, such as endemic corruption, ineffective use of resources and a host of problems within the national military-industrial complex. That said, the military transformation has resulted in an overall improved capability of the Russian armed forces, which have become a more effective and flexible foreign policy tool despite remaining shortcomings.

You argue Russian defense investment and the importance of its armed forces have grown systematically due to Russia's perceptions of the world order. Could you elaborate on the connection between military strength and world order?

Russia's threat perception, in particular its longstanding preoccupation with the aims of the Western/American power, of US military technological superiority and 'hegemonic' ambitions have been a key driver of the military change in the Russian armed forces. As I have argued in my 2012 research project (published in 2013), the importance given to the armed forces has deep roots in the Russian perception of the world order and mechanisms governing international relations. Since Putin has come to power, attitudes towards the military have undergone significant changes. Among major reasons were conclusions drawn from developments on the international stage where the role of military force seemed to have increased, rather than decreased, after the end of the Cold War. Russian decision makers make a direct connection between influence on world affairs and military strength. Driving the military modernization is an understanding among the ruling elite that traditional great power politics remains at the heart of the international system. Hence, maintaining strong armed forces is a prerequisite to ensuring prestige, international recognition, and great power status with a corresponding influence on world affairs. Military weakness has been identified as a major reason for Russia's repeated setbacks on the international stage following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Another important factor behind the relative success of the Russian military modernization has been the willingness and determination of the top political leadership to prioritize defense spending, converge institutional norms and foster the conditions needed to pursue defense innovation. That was also a major factor in overriding institutional conservatism in the defense sector, which successfully resisted previous attempts at significant military reforms in the 1990s.

Do you think a Russian military build-up or military confrontation in the Circumpolar North is likely, as the media often insinuates?

Ever since Russia has returned its attention towards the Arctic, there has been a long-running debate between competing narratives regarding the intent and rationale behind its Arctic behaviour. One representing an alarmist position, worried that Russia is militarizing the region, what will inevitably lead to a military conflict; and the other downplaying the Russian military build-up as merely a moderate modernization aimed at strengthening surveillance, safety and policing missions, and the like. Both views are, however, inaccurate.

The often divergent conclusions about Russia's objectives in the Arctic derive from the fact that Russia continues to pursue goals that may appear contradictory to outside observers, as both cooperation and confrontation constitute an integral part of the country's policies in region. Russia is perfectly capable of living with the ambivalence. Hence, Russia maintains practical international cooperation in the region in a broad range of fields, supported by a generally conciliatory rhetoric. At the same time, Russia pursues competition and deterrence of potential rivals in the Arctic, among other means by implementing a large-scale military modernization program in the region.

Initially, the Russian plans for strengthening its defense in the Arctic, as presented in 2008, were rather modest and did not envisage a significant increase in the number of military personnel. That has obviously changed since Russia has embarked on a large-scale military modernization in the Arctic across all defense branches, with a special focus on the air and maritime domain. The military ambitions have expanded in tact with the more nationalist and isolationist turn in Russian policies after Putin's return as president in May 2012. No matter what we call the Russian activity in the Arctic – modernization or militarization – the fact is that Russia's military capabilities have improved significantly as a result of the large-scale military modernization, sharply increased quality and quantity of military exercises, and combat experience gained abroad. Russia is today better prepared to participate in complex military operations than a decade ago, including in joint operations, strategic mobility, and rapid reaction. Its ability to limit or deny access and control various parts of the Arctic has increased accordingly.

Importantly, the Russian armed forces deployed in the Arctic are not going to stay only in the Arctic. With the increased mobility, the military units can be transferred rapidly to support Russia military operations in other regions. We have observed this trends in the exercise pattern, as well as in real combat operations, including in Donbas in Ukraine where Russia has sent the Northern Fleet's 200th Motorized Infantry Brigade from Pechenga. The trend is

likely to continue, because Russia's military capabilities remain limited, despite the on-going modernization.

Currently, there are few potential sources of intrastate conflict in the Arctic, at least compared to many other places in the world. One important exception is the sensitive case of the Svalbard archipelago, which is under Norway's jurisdiction, but where Russia, together with several other countries, has been critical to the Norwegian exercise of authority. Inadvertent escalation in the region is one possibility. The Arctic is also likely to play a role in case of a major conflict outside the region, especially one that would engage great powers. Russia expects that in such case, the strategic assets and military infrastructure in the Arctic – related in particular to the nuclear deterrence – would become major targets. This has been a theme of several Russian military exercises in the last years, for instance during the 'Kavkaz' 2012 and 'Zapad' 2013.

So although there is a relatively low level of tensions in the region today, it may change rapidly in case of a major confrontation between for instance NATO and Russia elsewhere. Russia has significant strategic advantages in the Arctic, and military build-up has further deepened the asymmetry of power between Russia and other stakeholders in the Arctic. We should follow the development closely given Russia's use of the element of surprise to achieve an advantage in recent military operations.

To what extent does development within Russia's Arctic neighbors shape Russia's Arctic security and its broader military strategy in the region?

Russia's policies in the region, including the military build-up, have been driven by a number of factors: Russia's political philosophy, including the primacy given to a leadership by great powers and perceived central role of the armed forces as a foreign policy tool; military-strategic calculations, including an extensive threat perception involving both symmetrical and asymmetrical threats with source in and outside the Arctic region; as well as Russia's ambitious Arctic economic development that needs adequate protection, in addition to a number of domestic incentives.

The Russian defense policy in the region is to a very limited degree affected by what Russia's Arctic neighbors are doing, despite what the Russian official rhetoric may claim. However, Russia has been uneasy about the significant increase in international attention for the Arctic since the early 2000s. The concern has been that, in the future, it may result in a stronger foreign presence in the Arctic. Consequently, it has fuelled the Russian sense of insecurity and fear that the country's positions may get undermined and that Russia may be driven away from the region by other stakeholders. This reasoning has been one of incentives behind the drive to strengthen Russia's positions in the Arctic with military, diplomatic, economic and other available means.

Your recent work has examined the 'international order at sea' in the Arctic. With the ice diminishing and potential sea routes opening, what do you consider are the biggest challenges to Russia's maritime security and its Arctic superpower status?

The Arctic Ocean as a resource and as a medium of transportation is undergoing extraordinary changes – basically, a new ocean is opening on the "top of the world". If there will be an open ocean, it will be used. Hence, we expect that the human presence in the region will continue to increase, even though development will be non-linear. The source of the biggest challenge to Russia's maritime security is the growing accessibility of the Arctic Ocean for a broader human exploitation, including maritime shipping, extraction of natural resources, energy in particular, as well tourism, naval activity, to name but a few examples. It may become a source of a range of asymmetrical security challenges and threats, such as environmental disasters involving oil and gas exploitation and shipping. They would have far-reaching consequences given that crisis management, disaster relief, and search and rescue is still limited in the region. Furthermore, Russia has an enormous territory in the Arctic with approximately 20000 km of sea borders and 10000 km land border. Surveillance, control and law enforcement in this vast and often uninhabited region, with scarce infrastructure and extreme climatic conditions, is a significant challenge. Symmetrical threats in Arctic waters that I have already mentioned cannot be excluded, although they appear less likely.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations,

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particularly those interested in Russian strategy?

It is hard to give advice for everybody, but on a general level, which also applies to those interested in Russian strategy, I would say that it is important to understand what fascinates you and what you truly care about. There is vast knowledge and experience to gain and fascinating people to meet, among the many reasons that make work in academia and related positions an extraordinary way of living – including the fact that you never stop learning. But it is also a demanding profession, with a never-ending process of thinking about your work and of writing. It is easier to get through the tougher parts of it and make necessary sacrifices when you work on a topic that truly engages you.

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This interview was conducted by Evangelina Moisi. Evangelina is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.