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A warning from the skies

Europe's military response to Putin's air provocations shows that its defences are in place. What remains missing is political confidence

There has, in recent weeks, been much heated debate around the airspace violations along NATO's eastern flank by Russian drones and fighter jets. Many declared that Putin was deliberately testing NATO, Europe or both, while some insisted he should be made to understand that enough was enough. Next time, they argued, NATO needed to be less tentative, to shoot planes down; this firmer response would send a clear message to Moscow. Before any further action is considered, however, we should first determine whether the alliance actually passed this supposed test.

Overall, the verdict should probably be 'yes but': militarily, NATO passed with flying colours; politically, NATO allies deserve a 'D' at best.

At no point did Russia's incursions pose any real military danger to NATO territory. Via a proportionate response, the alliance clearly signalled to Russia that its airspace is well defended. There was no capitulation, but also no escalation. The political reactions, on the other hand, were rather less assured. Some decision-makers unnecessarily went into panic mode, thereby revealing their own sense of insecurity.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Faced with airspace violations by Russian fighter jets, NATO's military defence mechanisms functioned flawlessly. The Russian MiGs were spotted, intercepted and escorted out of NATO airspace. The fact that the planes were armed would have been factored into the threat analysis; decision-makers deemed that intercepting the planes and escorting them out of NATO airspace would be a proportionate response, and the operation was duly executed — mission defined and accomplished. Looking forward, NATO can be relaxed about the prospect of further 'tests', i.e. the potential for further incursions by Russian jets. Its systems proved dependable, while such operations are significantly more burdensome to Russia's already depleted air force than they are to its

European counterparts. European NATO members not only have more planes than Russia, their planes are also more modern than Russia's. What's more, they are currently further modernising their fleets, adding latest-generation jets, whereas Russia remains primarily reliant on older planes that are at greater risk of wear and tear.

As regards the drones, NATO was able to bring down a few, with the rest coming down of their own accord once they'd run out of fuel. The deployment of conventional weapons systems to repel drones, however, is akin to using very expensive sledgehammers to crack very small nuts. It underlines that, while NATO may be ready to tackle conventional threats from fighter jets, there's still room for improvement where drones are concerned. Such incidents emphasise that the alliance faces new challenges in protecting both its airspace and its civilian infrastructure, as evidenced by recent incursions at Copenhagen and Oslo airports. Given what we have seen in Ukraine, it should have long since been apparent that new investment in defence systems, jamming technology and drones was required, a necessity the Baltic states have been highlighting for years.

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This oversight is at least now being corrected after the 'drone wall' idea proposed by Estonia was taken up by Commission president Ursula von der Leyen; EU support and funding means concrete progress towards its implementation could soon be forthcoming. Combining European and Ukrainian technology while drawing on the experiences of the Ukrainian army should allow existing gaps to be plugged relatively quickly.

The political reactions to these airspace violations, however, stand in stark contrast to the military response. The strident declaration made by Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski is a case in point. At an emergency UN Security Council meeting called by Estonia, Sikorski stated that if another missile or aircraft were to enter NATO airspace without permission and then get shot down, Russia should not 'come here to whine about it'. And yet the overriding impression is that it's the European side doing most of the 'whining', while Putin basks smugly in the agitation his provocations have caused.

After all, such reactions are merely grist to the Russian leader's mill: with minimum effort, he has succeeded in generating maximum attention and triggering hectic diplomatic efforts. Within NATO, for instance, consultations took place after Article 4 was invoked; this allows any member to consult with its allies when its territorial integrity, political

independence or security is threatened. An emergency session of the UN Security Council was also scheduled so that Russia could be held to account on the international stage. Coverage in the European press further stoked fear of a Russian attack.

Signs of weakness?

There are three conclusions we can draw from these reactions, none of which make good reading for Europe:

Firstly, Russia can gleefully highlight European double standards and the way Western issues dominate in multilateral institutions. In non-Western countries, such an interpretation is likely to receive a sympathetic hearing. That European countries insisted on calling an emergency UN Security Council meeting over an airspace violation that lasted 12 minutes seemed an overreaction to many UN member states, particularly given that, just a few days earlier, the Israeli air force had bombed targets in Qatar — a violation that elicited at best equivocatory official statements from those self-same guardians of international law.

Secondly, political reactions within the alliance have largely lacked proportionality. Invoking Article 4 of the NATO treaty is one of the weightiest tools at a member's disposal. It begs the question of how they would respond should a more serious incident occur — an entirely plausible scenario in the eyes of many observers. Given that Russia has been actively pursuing a policy of airspace violations for years, this triggering of the consultation mechanism seems less a sign of NATO's resolve and more an indication of the insecurity among its members. It demonstrates that Eastern European members are, first and foremost, attempting to reassure themselves that they can rely on the support of their allies, and of the US in particular. Their actions are a direct consequence of Trump's presidency and give the impression of someone whistling as loudly as possible in the dark. From a Russian perspective, they can be read as a sign of weakness within NATO.

If and when the next airspace violations occur, European NATO partners should respond more phlegmatically, taking their cue from the doctrine of 'peace through strength'.

Thirdly, these reactions suggest Europe lacks faith in its own strength. As explained above, there is a massive imbalance between the Russian air force and the air forces of European NATO members. Europe is in a position of strength, and yet it doesn't act that way. This was an opportunity to demonstrate Europe's ability to act decisively. Putin is operating from a position of weakness, but knows how to achieve maximum political effect. Instead of

making it clear that Russia managed to scrabble together and deploy a few planes for cheap, provocative incursions that NATO was able to effortlessly repel, thereby setting clear boundaries, European actors talked up a military threat that never existed. This helps to drive the Russian narrative of European weakness and also shapes public discourse within Europe.

If and when the next airspace violations occur, European NATO partners should respond more phlegmatically, taking their cue from the doctrine of 'peace through strength'. The military response should be proportionate, and gaps in the alliance's drone defences should be quickly and comprehensively plugged; the political response, on the other hand, should be calm and collected, demonstrating confidence in the allies' own strength. Both Russia and the general public should get the message that NATO will rigorously defend its airspace and that Russia's policy of provocations won't succeed. This would take the wind out of Russia's sails, boost domestic confidence in the alliance's strength and prevent the US administration under Trump from becoming inured to Europe's security worries. After all, if every Russian provocation triggers a NATO consultation and forces the president to make public statements, there is a risk that Europe will cry wolf once too often — and that Trump will then ignore events across the Atlantic when it really matters.

Many European politicians insist that Putin (like Trump) only understands the language of strength. This was an opportunity for Europe to genuinely show its strength by reacting with self-assurance rather than immediately going into panic mode. Given how successful Putin's strategy was first time round, the opportunity for NATO members to respond better next time is sure to come around soon.



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