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Comments on the Brussels Summit Communique, 14 June 2021

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The document reveals deep concern about the current security environment, which is assessed as “increasingly complex”, as “pervasive instability” and in general threatening to NATO. In this regard, a knowledgeable observer can easily draw a parallel with similar documents in Russia, which are also full of alarmistic assessments. Of course, in each case a view is that this is the opposite side, which is a source of instability and risks. The approach of the Alliance is embodied in a manichaeian statement: “While NATO stands by its international commitments, Russia continue to breach the values, principles, trust...”.

While being a document, which clearly includes different proposals of different countries (leading sometimes to duplication and repetitions), the Communique is consistent in labelling the “other” – Russia – as an aggressor, irresponsible and provocative player, which wants to undermine the “rules-based international order”. According to paragraph 3, Russia constitutes a primarily threat to Euro-Atlantic security. Russia is depicted not only as one of leading challenges to NATO but as a threat, which is more dangerous than international terrorism.

For the first time in NATO’s Communique (and apparently as a derivative – In the next NATO’s strategic concept) China is mentioned several times. It is characterized as a potential, not immediate challenge. Interestingly, the policy of China is called “assertive”, an adjective, which in the past for a long time was reserved for Russia (see paragraph 55).

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Still China is mentioned in the document 10 times and Russia – 61 times. Clearly, NATO has made steps, but only some steps, towards the US in incorporating in its security perceptions China as a looming challenge, keeping the “Russian threat” as its dominant rallying cry. It remains to be seen if in the next strategic concept, which will be published next year, the status of the “Chinese threat” increases or stays measured as in the present Communiqué. The other question is if in the future China’s factor in NATO’s eyes will be coming to the fore replacing Russia or the “division of labour” will stay the same: the strategic mission of the US will be a competition with and constraining of China and NATO’s mission will be defending from and deterring Russia.

Besides repeated references to the “rules-based order”, the Communiqué is steadfast in its “no return to business as usual” thesis, which in fact is not what Russia itself is looking and asking for. Rare encouraging lines, which are mixed with hard talk and submerged in harsh rhetoric, can be found in paragraph 9 about NATO’s openness to political dialogue, its unwillingness to seek confrontation and about its commitment to the NATO-Russia Founding Act. However, the latter point is phrased in such a way that it can be interpreted as the Alliance’s refusal to discuss Russia’s concerns about the principle of rotation deployments, which in the eyes of Moscow in the past years de facto has become barely distinguishable from additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.

Additional concerns about NATO’s posture may arise from paragraph 11 and 14 about “provocative activities, including near NATO borders... the continued military build-up in Crimea...”, “illegal annexation of Crimea”, “restricting navigation in parts of the Black Sea”, etc. Against the backdrop of the HMS Defender deliberate provocation in the territorial waters of Russia off the coast of Crimea on 24 June 2021, the wording of the Communiqué may be interpreted as an encouragement of such activities by NATO member-states in the future, which next time may lead to a direct military conflict between Russia and NATO.

For the first time in NATO Communiqué Belarus is mentioned as an object of NATO attention and Russia’s military integration with Belarus – as a source of threat per se (paragraph 11). Zapad-2021 exercise is pointed out in paragraph 54.

A novelty is an accusation of Russia, besides “malicious cyber activities”, of its “turning a blind eye to cyber criminals operating from its territory” (paragraph 12). Now Russia is kept responsible not only for ostensible state or state-supported cyber activities but also for any cyber-criminal acts targeting NATO countries, emanating from the territory of Russia, and all such acts are treated as supported by the Russian state or being connived by it. Interestingly, the same paragraph says about “illegal activities by Russian Intelligence Service” raising a question if Russia and NATO countries should make all activities of their intelligence services “legal”.

A harsh language is applied to the nuclear posture of Russia (aggressive, irresponsible, intimidation, etc.) without a hint of the Alliance’s openness to a dialogue with Moscow on nuclear doctrines (paragraph 15). Instead, the Communiqué suggests such a dialogue between NATO and China. Such an approach contradicts the Geneva summit decisions to launch consultations between Russia and the US on the future of strategic stability. Also, this

approach contradicts the views of Paris and Berlin on a necessity to launch a dialogue with Moscow in the aftermath of Geneva. Paragraph 15 also contradicts paragraph 45, where NATO welcomes the extension of the New Start, a dialogue on strategic stability and new talks on future arms control measures. Judging from these inconsistencies, one may conclude that the Alliance has no appetite for a tangible role in shaping the future of strategic stability, not to mention the participation in the dialogue.

Paragraph 15 could become a silver lining; however, its wording again is frustrating. It says about NATO readiness for the next meeting of the NRC – an intention, which is immediately neutralized by a precondition designed to be rejected by Moscow – the first topic on the agenda should be the conflict in Ukraine. As to the “military lines” of communication, “NATO remains committed” (with the adjective) “existing” military lines, which shows NATO’s unwillingness to consider even modest and purely practical expansion of mil-to-mil contacts. The further potential for a dialogue with Russia is also preconditioned by something that is difficult to understand – “when its actions make that possible”.

In spite of the fact that the Communique mimics the US formulations about the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan (paragraph 18-19), it says nothing about possible cooperation with Russia – the topic discussed in Geneva. There is only a vague point on a dialogue with “relevant international and regional partners”. At the same time, it should be noted that due to the fact that the US has stopped expressing allegations about Russia paying Taliban for killing American soldiers, the Communique does not mention it either.

One more contentious topic, raised in the Communique, evolves from the demise of the INF treaty, initiated by the US. Paragraph 26 gives some hope: “We have no intention to deploy land-based nuclear missiles in Europe”. However, Russia’s proposal for a moratorium is described as not credible and not acceptable (paragraph 46). At the same time, it seems that the Russia’s proposal (in fact several of them) is so serious that right after refuting it, the Communique says that NATO is open to arms control discussions and dialogue on transparency and confidence-building measures (in fact a part of the Russia’s proposal). Also, it should be noted that the INF treaty covered intermediate missiles both nuclear and non-nuclear whereas the citation above covers only nuclear missiles. At last, paragraph 48 makes matters even more confusing by stating that “to address the collapse of the INF due to Russia’s actions”, NATO is “committed to maintain appropriate consultations among Allies on these issues”. It can be interpreted as NATO’s readiness to change its view on the non-deployment if necessary.

The Communique continues to expand the remit of Article 5 (paragraphs 31-33). Now not just cases of cyber-attacks and attacks to, from or within space can leave to invocation of Article 5 but also cases of hybrid warfare can do the same. Moreover, attribution is proclaimed a “sovereign national prerogative”, giving carte blanche to individual member-states to name a perpetrator.

Another topic with mixed signals is a NATO BMD, which the Alliance is committed to develop (paragraph 42-44, 52). At first it is restated that BMD is purely defensive, is not directed against Russia, and Moscow is welcome to discuss BMD with NATO. At the same time, it says about the “increasing threat posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles” and

about “the latest common threat assessments”, which may imply NATO’s allegations toward 9M729. Moreover, besides the traditional call on Iran to stop ballistic missile activities, the Communique keeps expanding the reasoning for BMD raising a question of the ballistic missile threat from Syria.

Conspicuous is the accusation of Russia’s “failure” to comply with its obligations under the Treaty on Open Skies (paragraph 50) implying that it is Russia who is responsible for the treaty’s demise, and in spite of the fact that J. Biden during the presidential campaign called against the US withdrawal. Also, it is difficult to explain the point that “it is essential that all State Parties [of the OST] fully implement its provisions”, as if the US has not left it and Russia has not taken a final decision to do the same. A guess can be that this wording reflects views of some of the Allies who still believe that it is possible to somehow save the OST. The same paragraph includes a strange phrase about Russia’s “long-standing failure to implement” the CFE Treat as if the treaty still exists.

At last, the Communique promotes strong irritants in its relations with Russia, which are NATO’s open door policy, its growing security cooperation with neutral states and its activities in Central Asia. In cases of both Georgia and Ukraine it is stated in affirmative that these states “will become” members of NATO. At the same time, Russia has made it clear that the membership of Georgia and especially Ukraine in NATO is a “red line”, which Russia will not permit the Alliance to cross.

All in all, the document sadly contains few tangibles on NATO-Russia military risk reduction even on practical issues of obvious mutual interest. At the same time, it has incorporated a new dose of harsh rhetoric against Russia, which in some instances runs counter to the results of the Geneva summit. Some parts of the documents contradict each other. There is an impression that as far as Russia is concerned the task of the document was to strengthen even further its “hard talk” on Russia while keeping a minimal set of formal references about selective engagement. The Communique tilts further in the direction of raising stakes and showing no interest of NATO in playing its own or at least supportive role in military de-escalation in Europe. It seems that in this regard the Alliance’s intention is to wait and see what will happen next in Russia – US relations.

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