# European Union Foreign Affairs Journal

eQuarterly for European Foreign, Foreign Trade, Development, Security Policy, EU-Third Country Relations and Regional Integration (EUFAJ)

 $N^{\circ} 03 - 2014$ 

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### **ISSN 2190-6122**

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NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made his point clear: "Russia's illegal and illegitimate aggression against Ukraine is the greatest challenge to Europe's security in a generation. So we have rightly reinforced the defense of our Allies, including Poland." (NATO 2014) In other words: to balance<sup>56</sup> against the Russian aggression and threat, NATO is considering permanently deploying troops in the alliance's Eastern European member states.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> An extended version of this analysis will appear in the next issue of *Zeitschrift für Auβen- und Sicherheitspolitik* (ZfAS). I thank Professor Dr. Thomas Jäger and Professor Dr. Reinhard C. Meier-Walser for their valuable comments and suggestions, which significantly contributed to improving the quality of my analysis.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Balancing is not limited to joining a powerful alliance (like NATO) or building up arms, which are two classical forms of balancing (Waltz 1979, 168), but rather refers to all strategies of a state that aim reduce a perceived threat by improving the security situation of the threatened state(s) compared with the state(s) perceived as a threat (Bock und Henneberg 2013, 9–15). For example, by imposing sanctions against Russia or by planning to reinforce troops in Eastern European NATO member states the US and EU are balancing against Russia using strategies aiming to improve the US and European power and security position compared to that of Moscow (part of these strategies may also be described as deterrence). In short, balancing refers to all state strategies intended to weaken the power position of the state(s) perceived as a threat.

And how should Rasmussen have reacted differently? Moscow annexed Crimea from Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin used the annual military parades commemorating the victory over Nazi Germany as a show of force not only in Moscow, but also in Crimea. Moreover, Russia stationed an estimated 40,000 troops near the Ukrainian eastern border, which was undoubtedly a threat to Ukrainian security and territorial integrity.

From a Western perspective, the Ukraine Crisis seems easy to judge: Russia is the aggressor and poses a threat to peace and security. Consequently, the reactions of the US and NATO are only defensive. As US General Philip Breedlove said, "We are taking measures that should be very easily discerned as being defensive in nature. This is about assuring our allies, not provoking Russia." (Reuters 2014)

The problem is that Russia can easily misperceive these measures as provocative. The statement of John Foster Dulles, former US Secretary of State, projects a dilemma of perception that is still applicable: "Khrushchev does not need to be convinced of our good intentions. He knows we are not aggressors and do not threaten the security of the Soviet Union." (Jervis 1976, 68) As we know today, Khrushchev saw the US as a severe threat to the Soviet Union, which was one of the reasons for his decision to deploy nuclear missiles to Cuba. Although the US and NATO may not have offensive or aggressive motivations for their deployment strategies towards the western border of Russia, Moscow may perceive otherwise (Bock 2013, 83–87; Bock and Henneberg 2013, 21–28).

The crucial point here is not that the perception of the Ukraine Crisis or the Cuban Missile Crisis lies in the eye of the beholder, but that we are too blind to see how far we threatened Russia and drove Moscow into that crisis, just as Kennedy was too blind to see how much the US nuclear missiles in Turkey threatened Khrushchev. The crucial question is: How could Kennedy fail to see how provoking and threatening his policy was to Khrushchev?

I believe that the psychological phenomenon of inattentional blindness offers an explanation for the escalation of both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Ukraine Crisis. Inattentional blindness means the failure to perceive and notice an unexpected stimulus despite its being in one's own range of perception (Mack und Rock 1998; Mack 2003; Most u. a. 2005; Simons 2000).

My argument therefore goes beyond the scope of the research done on perception and misperception by authors such as Robert Jervis (Jervis 1976; Jervis, Lebow, and Stein 1989) or Richard Ned Lebow (Lebow and Stein 1994; Lebow 1984; Lebow 2010), in that I am not only concerned with the problem of *how* the Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba or the Russian annexation of Crimea is perceived, i.e. as a threat to US security or as a neo-Soviet aggressive

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Russian policy, but that I focus especially on *why* decision makers are too blind to see that their decisions are provoking and threatening – despite obvious consequences.

#### Kennedy Fails to See the Gorilla

As we know today, Kennedy knew only too well about the impact the Jupiter missiles would have on Khrushchev. Only three weeks after his inauguration, Kennedy was presented with a congressional report that was highly critical of the European missile deployment. Consequently, in April 1961 Kennedy asked for an internal review of the missile deployment, which revealed that the Jupiter missiles were militarily useless for anything but a first strike, i.e. that they would be provoking to the Kremlin (Lebow and Stein 1994, 44). Khrushchev also complained repeatedly about the deployment of these missiles (e.g. three times during their private talks at the Vienna summit in June 1961) (Lebow and Stein 1994, 44-45). In September of the same year, Khrushchev even told the New York Times how unhappy he felt about the nuclear weapons in Turkey: "She is our neighbour, but you have stationed your bases there and threaten us from those bases. [...]" (quoted in Lebow and Stein 1994, 45) And on 27 October 1962, during the Crisis, Khrushchev wrote a letter to Kennedy in which he defended the missiles in Cuba as a justifiable response to the Jupiter missiles in Turkey: "You are disturbed over Cuba. You say that this disturbs you because it is 90 miles by sea from the coast of the United States of America. But Turkey adjoins us; our sentries patrol back and forth and see each other. Do you consider, then, that you have the right to demand security for your own country and the removal of the weapons you call offensive, but do not accord the same right to us?" (Khrushchev 1962b)

Obviously, the effect of the *Jupiter* missiles on Khrushchev was in Kennedy's immediate range of perception. That notwithstanding, neither Kennedy nor the ExComm – as we know from the Kennedy Tapes, the secret recordings of the discussions that took place during the 13 days of the crisis – ever seriously considered that the Soviet missiles in Cuba might be a response to the *Jupiter* missiles, i.e. not an offensive measure, but rather a defensive measure to reduce the strategic vulnerability felt by the Soviet Union.

An exception may be Adlai Stevenson, then US Ambassador to the United Nations, who had always been skeptical of the air attacks against Cuba. On 19 October 1962, the fourth day of the crisis, he was the only one to propose a *quid pro quo*. After the Soviet had withdrawn the missiles from Cuba, the US would withdraw the nuclear missiles from Turkey. Stevenson faced strong, even shrill opposition and outrage in the ExComm; his recommendation to Kennedy was regarded as a clear sign of weakness to Khrushchev. As Stevenson later remarked: "I know that most of those fellows will consider me a coward for the rest of my life for what I said today, but

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perhaps we need a coward in the room when we are talking about nuclear war." (quoted in Baker 1996, 420)

Inattentional blindness always comes into play when our attention is captured by something else (e.g., the perceived threat of a Soviet nuclear attack), or if we have certain expectations (e.g., that the USSR is war-prone, as the Berlin Crisis indicated). We are then likely to be blind to obvious stimuli/information, like the impact the *Jupiter* missiles had on the Cuban Missile Crisis or the eastern expansion of NATO on the Ukraine Crisis. This insight dates back to late 1970s, when the psychologist Ulric Neisser was one of the first to systematically research the link between attention and perception. However, it was Daniel J. Simons and Christopher F. Chabris who attracted broad attention with their gorilla experiment in 1999 (Simons and Chabris 1999). Approximately half of the people who watched two groups of students playing ball failed to notice a person dressed in a gorilla suit crossing their field of perception. The clue to this puzzle is that the observers had the cognitively demanding task of counting the passes of only one of the two student groups, which made 50 per cent of them too blind to see the gorilla (Simons and Chabris 1999).

The same is true for decision processes in a crisis situation; which are beyond doubt extremely cognitively demanding for all participants. Given that the analysis of international relations and foreign policy decisions cannot rely on large-n experiments, as psychologists normally do, I used a qualitative approach to identify the reasons why Kennedy failed to see the connection between the *Jupiter* missiles and Soviet missile deployment to Cuba. As a content analysis of the Kennedy Tapes reveals, Kennedy suffered from inattentional blindness – and he could not see either the effect the *Jupiter* missiles had on Khrushchev, or how they affected the deployment of nuclear missiles to Cuba.

And as inattentionally blind as Kennedy was to the effect the *Jupiter* missiles had on Khrushchev, US and NATO policymakers seem to have been even more blind for years regarding the eastern expansion of NATO.

Richards J. Heuer offers an explanation for this "perception problem". He describes perception as "an active rather than a passive process; it constructs rather than records 'reality'" (Heuer 1999, 7). The active process of perception means that we construct meaning out of the abundance of perceived stimuli – and thus *de facto* create our own social reality. This process of constructing meaning and social reality depends on internal and external factors. As Heuer explains: "What people in general and analysts in particular perceive, and how readily they perceive it, are strongly influenced by their past experience, education, cultural values, and role requirements, as well as by the stimuli recorded by their receptor organs." (Heuer 1999, 7)

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Together, these factors constitute an expectation with which we respond to stimuli and interpret them.

For precisely this reason, the US and Israel were surprised on 6 October 1973 by the Egyptian-Syrian attack: The US and Israel thought that an attack by two Arab states was completely unlikely due to the massive military superiority of Israel. This image was very difficult to change, even after the war has started. As Robert Jervis writes: "The predisposition was so deeply ingrained that the image of the Arabs as weak and incompetent was not shattered on October 6, at least not in the United States." (Jervis 1985, 19) In addition, Washington ascribed to Egypt an understanding of rationality which corresponded to that of the US: that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat would only start a war if he could win it. Given that a war against Israel was perceived in Washington as unwinnable for both Egypt and Syria, the policymakers never seriously considered such an option and therefore failed to see the signs of war. (Jervis 1985, 19– 20) They obviously were too blind to see such information that they didn't expect.

#### A Threat – To Russia!

At the end of the Cold War, then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev developed an idea that would facilitate peaceful reconciliation between the conflict-prone spheres of influence in the East and West: the "all-European Home" (Malcolm 1989).<sup>57</sup> During a visit to Czechoslovakia in April 1987 he explained his idea in greater detail: "We assign an overriding significance to the European course of our foreign policy. [...] We are resolutely against the division of the continent into military blocs facing each other, against the accumulation of military arsenals in Europe, against everything that is the source of the threat of war. In the spirit of the new thinking we introduced the idea of the 'all-European house' [which] signifies, above all, the acknowledgment of a certain integral whole, although the states in question belong to different social systems and are members of opposing military-political blocs standing against each other. This term includes both current problems and real possibilities for their solution." (quoted in Svec 1988, 990)

In other words: the topos of the "Common European Home" originally meant to bridge the gap that the Iron Curtain had left between Eastern and Western Europe during the Cold War.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Gorbachev later transformed this idea into the concept of the "Common European Home": "The philosophy of the 'Common European Home' concept rules out the probability of an armed clash and the very possibility of the use of force or threat of force – alliance against alliance, inside the alliances, wherever. This philosophy suggests that a doctrine of restraint should take the place of the doctrine of deterrence. This is not just a play on words but the logic of European development prompted by life itself." (Gorbachev 1989, 5)

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But in retrospect and from the Russian perspective, Gorbachev's idea was systematically transformed into the exact opposite—an exclusive Western European home with former Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union member states changing sides. In 1999, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, former member states of the Warsaw Pact, joined NATO. With the second large expansion in 2004, seven Central and Eastern European countries joined NATO: Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, as well as three former Soviet Socialist Republics: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In 2009, Albania and Croatia joined the defensive alliance. Moreover, future expansion is still planned; Cyprus and Macedonia are interested in joining NATO, as are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Of course, this extension policy was not implemented exclusively by the US or the West, since all membership ambitions to NATO of the former satellite states of the Soviet Union or the former Soviet republics (the Baltic States) were made voluntarily or were even made on the initiative of these states.

As proven by declassified documents and interviews, the eastern expansion of NATO was a serious security concern that had already been haunting the Soviet Union on the eve of German reunification – and its own decline. In a 2009 interview, Gorbachev himself recalled "that Western Germany, the United States and other powers had pledged after Germany's reunification in 1990 that 'NATO would not move a centimetre to the east'" (RIA Novosti 2009). He continued, that "the Americans had failed to fulfil the promise and the Germans had also turned a blind eye" (RIA Novosti 2009). And as sorrow investigations of the German newsmagazine "Der Spiegel" uncover, in February 1990, the then German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher tried to silence scruples of his then Soviet ministerial colleague Eduard Shevardnadze by saying: "We are aware that NATO membership for a unified Germany raises complicated questions. For us, however, one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east." (quoted in Klussmann, Schepp, and Wiegrefe 2009) And Genscher added explicitly: "As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general."(Quoted in Klussmann, Schepp, and Wiegrefe 2009).

And although Gorbachev is often considered as the gravedigger of the Soviet Union (especially by Putin), he may nevertheless serve as an early witness of the longstanding Russian fear of the eastern enlargement of NATO.

Not surprisingly, Putin tried to delay the eastern expansion of NATO. In 2007, during the Munich Security Conference (MSC), he made his security concerns public: "It turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders, and we [...] do not react to these actions at all.

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I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?" (Putin 2007) He quoted the then NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner, who, according to Putin, declared that "the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee" (Putin 2007). Subsequently, these security guarantees diminished with the eastern expansion of NATO. As stated by Putin and repeated and reinforced by Gorbachev, the eastern expansion led to Russia's disillusionment with its post Cold War relations with the West (RIA Novosti 2009).

Putin's speech was neither perceived as a warning nor was it taken into account. Putin's actions are now taken seriously, but are wrongly perceived as undeniable indicators of an aggressive, neo-Soviet Russian foreign policy. It is reminiscent of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which Khrushchev warned Kennedy about Soviet security concerns regarding the US *Jupiter* missiles in Turkey, which he perceived as offensive (Lebow and Stein 1994, 44–48). Kennedy had never taken these complaints seriously. He then wrongly perceived the Soviet missile deployment to Cuba as aggressive. Such mistakes led the world to the brink of nuclear war (Lebow and Stein 1994, 5).

#### Seeing Things Come...

The Russian reaction shouldn't come as no surprise to western policymakers. On 2 May 1998, shortly after the U.S. Senate approved the first round of NATO expansion, the former U.S. diplomat George Kennan articulated his harsh critique in an interview in the New York Times, predicting a new Cold War (Friedman 1998). An interview that surely did not go unnoticed; Kennan was present at the creation of NATO and whose anonymous 1947 article in "Foreign Affairs", signed "X", defined America's cold-war containment policy for 40 years.

Asked by Thomas Friedman what the Russian reaction to the eastward expansion of NATO will be, Kennan answered: "I think it is the beginning of a new cold war [...] I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are – but this is just wrong." [...] " (Friedman 1998) The current escalation proved his analysis to be remarkably prescient.

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Still, the puzzling thing is: How could Western policymakers fail to see the extent to which their course of action threatened Russia and how much it checkmated Moscow over the years? One may object that the eastward expansion of both the EU and NATO was executed regardless of Russian objections because the US and NATO felt no need to consider Russian sensitivities, and not because they were inattentionally blind. Even then it remains puzzling why Russian security concerns are not taken seriously – *at least now*.

An analysis of the latest speeches of NATO Secretary General Rasmussen as well as US and European policymakers reveals that they too suffer from inattentional blindness; they fail to see that the eastern expansion of NATO is part of the escalation dynamic that tentatively ended in the annexation of Crimea – regardless of the Russian breach of international law.

The recently leaked draft of the NATO Defence Planning Committee (DPC) reads like a literal confirmation: "Russia's ability and intent to undertake significant military actions without much warning, represents a far-reaching threat to the maintenance of security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic zone. Russia is able to build a military threat from local or regional size at short notice and at any location." (Spiegel Online 2014c) In other words: Russia is the threat, not us!

#### Time to see the gorilla!

On 26 October 1962, shortly before the climax of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Khrushchev wrote an emotional appeal to Kennedy: "Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose."(Khrushchev 1962a) This was a call to action, to take the security concerns of the Soviet Union seriously, which Kennedy fortunately did on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the crisis.

Putin may not be as impulsive as Khrushchev was, but on Tuesday, 18 March, the day he announced the annexation of Crimea, he used a metaphor to describe Russia's limited scope of action in light of the eastern expansion of NATO, that is not less efficacious: "If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard." (Putin 2014) This is also a call to action, a wake-up call to the US and the EU. Russia is no longer willing to tolerate and accept the Western expansion of both political and military tools, i.e. the entry of Eastern European states especially into NATO. Stephen M. Walt reminds us of something Moscow has been doing

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for the last 20-plus years, "watching the United States and its European allies expand NATO eastward and deploy ballistic missile defenses there, to boot, with near-total disregard for Russian interests and complaints" (Walt 2014).

From the Russian perspective, the prospect of Ukraine becoming a member of NATO is a clear and immediate threat to its vital interests and security; no matter what intentions the Western states may have, as John J. Mearsheimer rightly points out: "[I]t is the Russians, not the West, who ultimately get to decide what counts as a threat to them." (Mearsheimer 2014b) Therefore, the prospect of Ukraine becoming a member of NATO was inacceptable to Russia. This should come as no surprise, at least not to Washington: "One might expect American policymakers to understand Russia's concerns about Ukraine joining a hostile alliance. After all, the United States is deeply committed to the Monroe Doctrine, which warns other great powers to stay out of the Western Hemisphere." (Mearsheimer 2014a) The same argument is made by Walt: "Imagine how Washington would react if a powerful China were one day to cultivate close security ties with Canada or Mexico, and you'll appreciate Putin's perspective a bit more." (Walt 2014)

A sustainable de-escalation of the Ukraine Crisis, which would benefit the EU, the US, and Ukraine, can only be achieved if the vital security concerns of Russia are considered. As indicated by the current escalation dynamic in which both sides are balancing against what they perceive as a threat, the sole focus of improving security is counterproductive (Bock, Henneberg, und Plank forthcoming). Here again, the Cuban Missile Crisis may serve as evidence. The efforts of Khrushchev and Kennedy to balance against the threats perceived from the opposing side led the world to the brink of nuclear war.

But what can be done? To break the vicious circle of escalation, a bargaining chip is needed – one that is valuable to one side and acceptable to the other. In the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles from Turkey fulfilled both conditions; it was valuable to the USSR and acceptable to the US.

At the moment, the credible termination of the eastward expansion of NATO may serve as such a bargaining chip. Given that for many years, the expansion of NATO towards Russia's western borders has been an issue of great concern for the Kremlin, it is most valuable to Moscow. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Foreign Minister, was therefore right to declare that "There is no pending NATO membership for Ukraine." (Spiegel Online 2014b; Spiegel Online 2014a) Although some may think otherwise, this is acceptable not only to the US and Europe but also to Ukraine. The security of Ukraine does not dependent on membership in NATO; multilateral security guarantees (with NATO and also with Russia) may even better serve this purpose –

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without provoking or threatening Russia. The key concept here is neutrality; something that worked e.g. for Austria since decades...

Honestly speaking, could anything better serve the security needs of Ukraine and the Baltic states than a Russia that is not balancing against a perceived threat at its western borders?

But if Western policymakers stay blind to vital Russian security concerns, the crisis will surely run the risk of escalating even further. Why haven't we learned this from the Cuban Missile Crisis?

As proven by the example of Adlai Stevenson, in times of crisis we need someone who thinks the unthinkable, someone who can see the gorilla: that it's *we* who pose a threat to Russia.

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