Commentary
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NATO's "Theory of Victory": Escalation or a hint of détente?

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

NATO's newly proclaimed "theory of victory" has caused a considerable stir both within the Alliance and beyond it. However, the interpretation of the remarks by NATO's top commander that dominates the media appears incomplete. By all indications, General Alexus Grynkewich's words in Warsaw draw heavily on the conceptual foundations of the legendary 1967 Harmel Report.

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On 12 October, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Alexus Grynkewich, presented the Alliance's so-called "theory of victory". He did so from the podium of the Warsaw Security Forum, which aspires to be the central transatlantic platform at a time when transatlantic relations are undergoing an active reconfiguration.

Somewhat schematically, Grynkewich reduced his theory to three consecutive stages of action that the Alliance under his command intends to take in response to hypothetical aggression against it. According to the general, NATO's combined forces would first "block" the initial aggressive actions against them. They would then make it impossible for the adversary to continue the attack ("blunt"). And should that prove insufficient to halt the adversary's activity, the Alliance would take action against it that would "break" its core offensive potential.

> At the same time, the American commander stressed that, under his leadership, NATO would not seek to inflict a strategic defeat on the adversary.

Since the entire speech was perceived through the prism of the rapidly mounting rhetoric across the Alliance about a future direct conflict with Russia, these words, too, can be read as a message to Moscow. Unsurprisingly, they provoked genuine indignation among many Europeans.

Why here and now?

The moment that NATO's top general chose to present his "theory of victory" to the world seems no less noteworthy than the substance of his speech. The same goes for the venue. During a short conversation with Grynkewich on the Warsaw Forum stage, the moderator asked him directly "why now and why here in Warsaw". The commander explained that, against the backdrop of heightened nervousness in Alliance countries over the Russian threat, he wanted to reassure the public and show that NATO's military component was prepared for anything and fully in control of the situation.

Of course, Russia is the key addressee of these messages. In Eastern Europe, the deterrence concept presented by the four-star American general is, by definition, aimed first and foremost at Moscow. Yet Russia is hardly the only, or even the primary, addressee, as many mainstream Western media outlets ingenuously suggested. Rather, as Grynkewich himself indicates, he was indeed speaking first of all to the Alliance's own "billion citizens".

What is happening in the media and political spaces of many European countries already resembles a public hysteria about the inevitability of a military clash with Russia. Such socio-political sentiments are arguably the most dangerous factor of all: they keep regional escalation at a high pitch, fuel the militarisation and securitisation of every sphere of life and, ultimately, in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, make the tragedy of war ever more real.

There are grounds to believe that this increasingly visible trend is met with little enthusiasm in Washington itself. Neither tactically, as it complicates current American plans to reduce the US military presence in Europe, nor strategically, as it runs counter to Washington's long-term need to redirect its military and political attention towards other geopolitical theatres that are more pressing for the United States. As the US Ambassador to NATO emphasised in Warsaw, Europe ranks only fourth on America's list of strategic priorities.

> To put it simply, escalating tensions with Russia and an all-out Cold War-style confrontation are not part of the Donald Trump administration's strategic plans – for the simple reason that times have changed and the world is a completely different place.

And from across the Atlantic, unlike from Eastern Europe, many parallels with the global confrontation with Moscow in the last century seem not only irrelevant but also counterproductive.

One can therefore predict with a fair degree of confidence that this line of thinking, albeit with many stylistic modifications, will be passed on from the current White House team to its successors, even if they turn out to be Democrats. Interestingly, this is exactly what Democratic Congressman Jim Himes explicitly warned participants of the Warsaw Forum about.

The details of NATO's "theory of victory" and Minsk's reaction

In Warsaw, Alexus Grynkewich confined himself to general points that outline the overall idea behind his theory. Additional details of what the classified part of NATO's plan contains began to leak into the public domain through a number of media reports. One such detail is the Alliance's planning of strikes on targets in Belarus.

Naturally, these details immediately drew a pointedly negative reaction from official Minsk. The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement firmly condemning the American general's remarks. Belarusian diplomats stressed that the North Atlantic Alliance's concept envisages preventive strikes on Belarusian territory using UAVs and ground robotic systems. As the statement put it, *"without any real preconditions for a conflict, NATO is making plans to build up its military presence near the borders and to strike the territory of a sovereign state"*.

In other words, from Minsk's vantage point it all looks as though *"under the cover of defensive wording, the bloc is in fact preparing the ground for military escalation and aggression"*. All the more so as Belarus itself is pointedly scrupulous about keeping the provisions of its military doctrine strictly defensive in nature.

Needless to say, Belarus could not have reacted to the Alliance's "theory of victory" in any other way. One can only imagine the uproar in NATO countries themselves had Belarusian, let alone Russian, military officials come out with similar statements about theories of victory.

At the same time, the Belarusian MFA once again underscored its long-standing call for openness, de-escalation and dialogue on an equal footing on all regional security issues. Importantly, this call is not limited to general words. In recent years, especially since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Minsk has repeatedly put forward concrete proposals on military transparency, confidence-building measures and de-escalation. These proposals have been, and continue to be, voiced both from high political podiums and through non-public diplomatic and expert channels. Responding to General Grynkewich's statements, Belarus once again urged its *"Western colleagues to show common sense and start working together to restore mutual trust".*

Has Grynkewich set his sights on Harmel?

> However strange it may sound in the context of the remarks by NATO's commander in Europe, it is precisely now that such calls are becoming not only particularly relevant but also potentially more realistic than they have been at any point in recent years.

After all, a close reading of General Grynkewich's speech at the Warsaw Forum leaves the impression that its key message in fact amounts to a reincarnation of the good old ideas of the late 1960s.

In December 1967, NATO adopted the "Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance", which became widely known as the Harmel Report. Its drafting was initiated by Pierre Harmel, then Belgium's Foreign Minister. The document proclaimed NATO's new approach to comprehensive security, which implied combining military and political-diplomatic instruments. The report made the case for a policy towards the Warsaw Pact that would simultaneously include components of deterrence and détente.

Reading Grynkewich's words carefully, it is difficult to avoid certain parallels with this legendary concept from the Alliance's archives. The parallels look all the more interesting because in the 1960s, as now, advancing a concept of simultaneous deterrence and dialogue with Moscow became possible only once it had been embraced in Washington. Although the report was then prepared under the leadership of a Belgian diplomat, it drew heavily on American approaches and ideas of the time. Strictly speaking, it could not have been otherwise.

> In substance, Grynkewich's "theory of victory" evokes strong associations with the Harmel Report because it, too, appears to combine various components pulling in different directions.

Moreover, NATO's commander is attempting this in an even more complex form today, as he is effectively trying to accomplish at least four tasks at once.

First, to deter Russia emphatically. This task is being pursued through two main theses: that NATO is ready for any level of escalation and will have superiority at every rung of the escalation ladder, and that its members will remain unshakably united.

Second, to calm public sentiment in NATO member states – and thereby deprive of political arguments those who advocate moving towards ever greater escalation with Russia while trying to derail the Trump administration's plans to reduce the US military presence and financial costs in Europe.

Third, to reassure European (and, for that matter, American) public opinion about the threat from Russia in a way that would nevertheless not mean rolling back the massive armament and rearmament programmes, which are being scaled up as military and military-related spending grows across the Alliance. For Washington, this is the main instrument that allows it not only to boost the revenues of the US defence industry but also to reduce its military presence and commitments in Europe without losing its principal levers of influence and control.

Fourth, to create a situation that would make it possible to lower the current acute tensions along the Russia–NATO axis, minimise the intentional and unintentional escalation risks associated with these tensions and begin substantive communication with Moscow. NATO – or rather its principal member, the United States – needs such communication not only to manage escalation risks in Eastern Europe but also for strategic purposes, given Washington's main geopolitical concern: China.

General Grynkewich touched upon all of these components in one way or another in Warsaw. It remains to be seen to what extent NATO under his command is ready to put them into practice.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations