



# ***DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY***

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## **Gunboat Diplomacy turns to Air Power Diplomacy in the Resurgent East-West Divide**

***Fighter aircraft probes of Arctic air defences, expanded surveillance and reconnaissance flights, and long-range nuclear bomber patrols seem once again to be the lingua franca of east-west diplomacy. And “East-West relations” is itself once more a term of art in global affairs as Moscow, Washington, and Brussels take up their quarrels and rely increasingly on military gestures do the talking for them. The ostensible point is to communicate strength and resolve, but there is an unavoidable subtext of impotence in posing threats you never want to carry out.***

Military symbolism is now literally in full flight. In the dominant western narrative, Russian flights are provocative and dangerous; in the east it's the reverse, with NATO the provocateur. From Europe to the Arctic to North America, over land and sea, air power diplomacy has taken centre stage.

Russian fighters buzz Canadian frigates in the Black Sea and pose dangers to civilian air traffic over the Baltic Sea. Russian strategic bombers patrol the Beaufort Sea, and NORAD jet fighters are scrambled on cue.<sup>1</sup> US reconnaissance aircraft patrol the Baltic Sea and Baltic States in range of Russian borders, jumping from 22 such flights in 2013 to 141 in 2014 according to Russian Air Force officials.<sup>2</sup> NATO flights near the border of Belarus and near Russia's Kaliningrad region are said to have doubled over the past year, exceeding 3000 in 2014.<sup>3</sup>

In the 1990s a US Naval War College paper hyped air power as “the new gunboat diplomacy,”<sup>4</sup> arguing it offered greater deployment speed and flexibility and a more credible threat inasmuch as the risk of casualties is kept low for any state wielding the air power. “Gunboat” or any kind of military “diplomacy” is basically the threat, or use, of limited military power in a situation other than war.<sup>5</sup> Some threats are latent – like peacetime naval deployments to show the flag, routine strategic bomber patrols, or, in the context of current East-West tensions, the steady eastward expansion of NATO. Others are more immediate and active – like military operations designed, not to directly engage, but to intimidate an adversary into changing its behavior in the context of a particular crisis.

The point of active air power “diplomacy” is to communicate resolve and unwavering commitment to protecting the particular interests deemed to be at stake. There is realist logic to it when the context is a major imbalance of power – when the state threatening the air power can be fully confident that it can make good on the threat without risking any serious retaliatory action. But that's not remotely the case in the new East-West stand-off. Neither side can reasonably expect to take direct hostile military action against the other without retaliation and thus paying a major price. So why threaten to do what you at all costs do not want to do?

It's a small-scale version of the dilemma of nuclear deterrence – which becomes a form of self-deterrence, and thus impotence, because of the certain knowledge that if the threat were ever acted upon, the only guarantee would be of self-destruction because the retaliatory commitment and capabilities of the adversary are beyond doubt. So, the threat of nuclear attack rings hollow, because the only relevant result of carrying out the threat would be one's own nuclear destruction in response.

Similarly, bravado flights of military aircraft, the purpose of which is to make political points and send messages, also ring hollow, and actually come to symbolize the opposite of what is intended. All rationality says that none of the differences now aggravating east-west relations is amenable to settlement by military means. A European battle employing the weapons systems that are now used as rather un-nuanced messengers of intended intimidation, would lead in a matter of days and weeks to consequences so disastrous and destructive that it is impossible to conceive of any political difference that would justify the mutual assaults. Henry Kissinger once made the point with regard to nuclear weapons – “any use of nuclear weapons is certain to involve a level of casualties and devastation out of proportion to foreseeable foreign policy objectives.”<sup>6</sup> Neither are there any current or foreseeable political objectives in Eurasia that could be effectively advanced by the main east-west protagonists turning their enormous conventional military combat arsenals on each other, and in the process risking escalation to nuclear use.

Does it ever make sense to threaten to do what you know will never be in your interests to do? Symbolic flights of fighter aircraft and bombers are intended to remind the adversary that these weapons are available for use. But in any rational world, they are clearly not available for use by Russia against NATO or by NATO against Russia. There is no circumstance under which this would make sense or serve the interests of either side. Neither side wants them to be used.

Yet, NATO’s response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea was a classic case of threatening to do what American and central European NATO states are nevertheless rightly convinced should never be done. NATO decided to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) that would be able to deploy within a few days in response to a crisis,<sup>7</sup> although there is no case of NATO having been politically ready to respond immediately to a crisis when it was prevented from doing so for reasons of logistics. NATO is now to develop the capacity to attack Russia or its allies within 48 hours, but it is enhancing its capacity to do what it will never do, and should never do, and that is to engage in direct combat with Russia or its immediate allies.

Continuing to make threats that must never be carried out is all the more irresponsible when we factor in the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. The danger is that heightened physical engagement and contact could turn to actual hostility, not at all over the substantive issue in politics or law, everybody knows they can’t be resolved militarily, but over a miscalculation. And what makes “air power diplomacy” against a rival power of extraordinary military capability especially dumb is that the risks increase in times of crisis, precisely when the objective should be de-escalation and risk reduction.

Communicating by fighter aircraft, when meeting rooms and the real language of diplomacy would be eminently more effective is the pre-eminent folly of the current east-west dynamic. Brandishing arsenals, whether nuclear or conventional, that cannot possibly be used to positive effect, is above all a way of advertising impotence.

Teddy Roosevelt advised speaking softly while carrying a big stick, but he was counting on just one side having the stick – if both sides have them and they’re both adorned with long spikes on the end, that’s a sign it’s time to speak more clearly and think about another kind of stick. If reason prevails, air power diplomacy will ultimately be exchanged for real conference table diplomacy, which is already backed by an array of economic and political sanctions. Brandishing arsenals, whether nuclear or conventional, that can be used only to one’s own peril, is above all a way of advertising political impotence.

There is a reason that there has been no state to state war since the Eritrea/Ethiopia fighting at the turn of the millennium. It's true, the powerful still invade the weak to advance the interests of the former (not that that works very well either). But mutually destructive forces (whether balanced or not is irrelevant) don't go to war with each other to settle a political dispute between them because it would be utterly self-destructive and thus irrational.

The problem is, states, even great states like the US and Russia, still act irrationally on a fairly regular basis. Which is why the absolute last thing they should be doing is indulging in the risky symbolism of air power diplomacy that could easily go wrong and lead to catastrophically irrational behavior. Following which the political dispute that prompted the air-power diplomacy in the first place would either remain unresolved or, more likely, be made utterly irrelevant by the whole new avalanche of political problems and instabilities that would follow deadly military exchanges.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014," European Leadership Network, Policy Brief, November 2014.

<http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2014/11/05/3b2f357f/Dangerous%20Brinkmanship.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "US Planes Flying Near Russian Border Almost Every Day: Russian Air Force," Sputnik International, 18 December 2014.

<http://sputniknews.com/russia/20141216/1015907245.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> James O. Poss, "Air Power: The New Gunboat Diplomacy?" Naval War College, Newport, 1995.

<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a279474.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Thomas D. Goodall, "Gunboat Diplomacy: Does it Have a Place in the 1990s?" *GlobalSecurity.org*, 1991.

<http://www.globalsecurity.org>

<sup>6</sup> Henry Kissinger, Speech to the 45th Munich Security Conference, delivered 6 February 2009.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/henrykissinger45thmunichsecurityconference.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Wales Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales, 05 Sep. 2014.

[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm?selectedLocale=en)