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Focus

PUTIN'S WEIRD WAR
GETS EVER RISKIER

September will be a nervous month in Eastern Europe. On Sept 14, Russia will unleash what may be its largest military exercise since the Cold War. In Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and elsewhere, officials are openly concerned that the "Zapad ('West') 2017" drills near their borders will be used as cover for a military attack. Russian President Vladimir Putin sees both conventional and nuclear posturing as a useful tool to reassert Moscow's status as a world power and intimidate nearby enemies. The three years since Russia's annexation of Crimea have seen a dramatic increase in Moscow's military activity.

But Russia's escalating confrontation with the West goes well beyond that. Moscow, Washington and other Western governments understand that any direct conflict between Russia and the West would prove disastrous. Instead, the face-off is worsening in wider, often weirder ways. And while many Americans would blame Moscow, many Russians see it differently.

Part of that is down to a Kremlin media machine that relentlessly pushes the message that Moscow must assert itself to avoid being surrounded and impoverished - and paints the West as chaotic, corrupt and Machiavellian. Such views are deeply embedded in Russia's national mindset. An unclassified report released by the US Defense Intelligence Agency in June concluded that senior Russian leaders genuinely believed Washington was intent on toppling them, particularly under President Barack Obama.

That belief creates mounting dangers that damage and destabilize both sides - and that show no signs of subsiding. Despite signs that President Donald Trump would still like to be in Putin's good graces, Congress and much of the US government simply will not let him - particularly as probes into Russian election hacking and the Trump campaign's Moscow links gather steam. With a continuous drip feed of allegations and revelations, it will become ever more toxic to relations.

On Aug 2, Trump bowed to bipartisan pressure in signing a bill to impose new sanctions demanded by Congress. It was a sign of just how Capitol Hill, not the president, now may be calling the shots - Trump complained on Twitter that the sanctions might dangerously imperil relations with Russia, but he was politically unable to block them.

At the end of the Cold War, Western leaders took the deliberate decision to pull Moscow into the West's economic structures to cement peace. The latest round of sanctions may be the final nail in the coffin of that approach. Writing on his Facebook page, Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev described them as "economic war," saying they ended any hopes for a rapprochement under the Trump administration.

Even as the proxy war Washington and Russia have been waging in Syria appears to be tailing off, the one in Ukraine appears intensifying. Last week, US Defense Secretary James Mattis announced the government is considering supplying lethal weaponry to Ukraine - primarily US-made antitank rockets - to be used in its ongoing war with Moscow-backed Russian-speaking separatists.

Meanwhile, Moscow is inserting itself more deeply into Washington's confrontation with North Korea. Last week, nuclear-capable Russian bombers probed Japanese and South Korean airspace. Moscow is encouraging Russian tourism to North Korea, inevitably complicating any US decision to conduct military action on the peninsula.

Interference

Russia's suspected interference in Western politics now goes well beyond intermittent hacking and the release of potentially sensitive information seen in the American, French and other elections. Social media experts say an army of suspected Russian-run Twitter feeds and other web and social media outlets are now also energetically pushing their own disruptive narratives into American and European political discourse.

Suspected Russian-linked "bots" - believed to be largely automated Twitter feeds - were observed spreading far-right messaging both before and after the white supremacist demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia. They are also accused of spreading rumors and criticism of US National Security Advisor H R McMaster during his reported face-off with now-ousted Trump strategist Steve Bannon. —Reuters



FOCUS ON RISKY US SHOOT-DOWN OPTION

North Korea's firing of a ballistic missile over Japan could increase pressure on Washington to consider shooting down future test launches, although there is no guarantee of success and US officials are wary of a dangerous escalation with Pyongyang. More attention is likely to focus on the prospects for intercepting a missile in flight after North Korea on Tuesday conducted one of its boldest missile tests in years, one government official said.

Such a decision would not be taken lightly given tensions over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. And while President Donald Trump has repeatedly vowed that "all options are on the table", there has been no sign of any quick policy shift in Washington toward direct US military action. But Pyongyang's launch of an intermediate-range Hwasong-12 missile over Japan's northern Hokkaido island underscored how Trump's tough rhetoric, pursuit of sanctions and occasional shows of military force around the Korean peninsula have done little to deter North Korea's leader.

"Kim Jong Un has chosen to thumb his nose at the Americans and Japanese by conducting this test," said David Shear, former US assistant secretary of defense for East Asia. US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis

has already pledged that the military would shoot down any missile it deemed a danger to US or allied territory. What is unclear is whether Washington would be prepared to use its multi-layered missile defense systems to intercept a missile like the one that overflew Japan but never directly threatened its territory.

Doing so would essentially be a US show of force rather than an act of self-defense. "I would think that in government deliberations that would likely be one of the options out on the table," Shear said. Some analysts say there is a danger that North Korea would see it as an act of war and retaliate militarily with potentially devastating consequences for South Korea and Japan. China, North Korea's neighbor and main trading partner, would also likely oppose such a direct US military response.

Minimizing Damage

Experts say there is no guarantee that US missile defense systems, including Aegis ballistic missile defense ships in the region and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems based in Guam and South Korea, would hit their target, despite recent successful tests. A failed attempt would be an embarrassment to the United States and could embolden North Korea, which this

year has already conducted two tests of an intercontinental ballistic missile believed capable of hitting the US mainland. The United States has spent \$40 billion over 18 years on research and development into missile defense systems but they have never been put into operation under wartime conditions.

Mattis this month expressed confidence the US military could intercept a missile fired by North Korea if it was headed to Guam, after North Korea said it was developing a plan to launch four intermediate range missiles to land near the US territory. If North Korea fired at the United States, the situation could quickly escalate to war, Mattis said.

Growing Threat

Not everyone is convinced the US military can defend against North Korea's growing missile capability. Some experts caution that US missile defenses are now geared to shooting down one, or perhaps a small number, of incoming missiles. If North Korea's technology and production keep advancing, US defenses could be overwhelmed. "If a shootdown fails, it would be embarrassing, though not terribly surprising," said Michael Elleman, a missile expert at the 38 North think tank in Washington.

"Missile defense does not provide a shield that protects against missiles. Rather, it is like air defense; it is designed to minimize the damage an adversary can inflict," he said. One US official said the military would be especially cautious about shooting down a North Korean missile that did not pose a direct threat because of the risk of civilian casualties if it were intercepted over Japan or South Korea, as well as difficulty in determining how Pyongyang might retaliate. The official spoke on condition of anonymity. US military and intelligence officials warn North Korea could unleash a devastating barrage of missiles and artillery on Seoul and US bases in South Korea in response to any military attack.

Targeting of a North Korean missile in flight that did not endanger the United States or its allies could also raise legal questions. UN Security Council resolutions that ban Pyongyang's ballistic missile programs do not explicitly authorize such actions. Japan also faces questions over the legality of shooting down missiles in its airspace but not aimed at Japan. Under legislation passed in 2015, Tokyo can exercise a limited right of collective self-defense, or militarily aiding an ally under attack, if it judges the threat to Japan as "existential." —Reuters

US MAY FAIL TO HEED HARVEY CLIMATE WARNING

Unprecedented flooding unleashed by Hurricane Harvey in the southern United States underscores the need for even wealthy countries to ramp up their disaster plans to keep vulnerable people safe and help them deal with the knock-out blows climate change could bring, experts say. Yet few expect the devastation wrought by Harvey to convince US President Donald Trump to boost government funding for disasters or reinstate regulations that would limit heat-trapping emissions and protect infrastructure from extreme weather, let alone reconsider his decision to quit the Paris Agreement on climate change.

"What Hurricane Harvey is demonstrating to those few hold-out climate change sceptics is that this is our new reality. And it's only going to get worse," said Heather Coleman, associate director for climate change and energy policy at Oxfam

America. "As we've seen in other disasters here and around the world, it's the poorest who are the most vulnerable."

At least nine people have been killed and some 30,000 are expected to be forced from their homes by flooding brought by the slow-moving storm, which slammed into Texas from the Gulf of Mexico at the weekend. Police, national guard and rescue workers are helping people still trapped in Houston, the fourth most-populous US city, and a state of emergency has been declared in Louisiana. The biggest storm to hit Texas in 50 years, Harvey could cause up to \$20 billion in insured losses, making it one of the costliest storms in US history, according to Wall Street analysts.

Experts at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and the World Meteorological Organization have said Harvey's extreme rainfall was likely made worse by climate change. "State govern-

ments, governors, city mayors (and) scientists all over the (United States) are very much agreeing that climate change is real," said Saleemul Huq, director of the Dhaka-based International Centre for Climate Change and Development. "Harvey is sending tonnes and tonnes of water on their heads as proof that this is what is likely to happen with human-induced climate change."

Besides promising to pull the United States out of the 2015 Paris accord to curb global warming, Trump has threatened to cut billions of dollars in funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which is now coordinating the Texas relief response. Key posts at US weather-tracking agencies remain empty, while a swathe of Obama-era environmental regulation has been dismantled under the Republican president, who is facing the country's biggest natural disaster since he

took office in January.

Earlier this month, Trump rolled back rules for environmental reviews and restrictions on government-funded building projects in flood-prone areas, revoking an executive order by his predecessor aimed at reducing exposure to flooding, sea level rise and other consequences of climate change.

'Playing Politics'

With disasters costing over \$175 billion in economic losses last year, according to reinsurer Swiss Re, investing in measures to better protect those at greatest risk is essential, as the intensity and frequency of extreme weather is expected to increase, experts say. "Let us stop playing politics around what is happening with climate change and nature, and really make the long-term decisions that deal not just with infrastructure, but the lives and livelihoods of people," said Jo Scheuer, director for climate change and disaster risk reduction at the United Nations Development Programme.

Key measures include "building back better" after a disaster, forecasting climate trends decades ahead, and factoring in estimates of sea level rise and storm surges when deciding how to rebuild shattered communities to reduce the impact of future storms, he said. In some cases, governments may have to decide to relocate people and infrastructure from disaster-prone areas, he added. "What we've gotten pretty good at overall is dealing with the immediate disaster event - meaning moving people out of harm's way... to eliminate the loss of life," said Scheuer. "In most cases, what we have not gotten good at is... to ensure that every investment we make is made with understanding the risk involved."

Despite the hefty cost of Hurricane Harvey, many experts doubt that Trump will acknowledge the scientific link between climate change and weather disasters, or bolster funding and regulation to limit devastation from future floods and storms. "The Trump administration so far has not really shown any inclination to create policy based on realities on the ground - and certainly not based on challenges that every day people are facing," said Brandon Wu, director of policy and campaigns for ActionAid USA. — Reuters



A boat makes its way up the flooded Lake Houston Parkway as floodwaters from Tropical Storm Harvey rise on Tuesday in Kingwood, Texas. —AP

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