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Russia and Nato training for war with each other, say analysts

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Polish special forces take part in a Nato exercise of the high-readiness task force in June 2015 in Zagan, Poland. Troops from Germany, Norway, Belgium, Poland, the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Belgium were among those taking part

Russia and Nato are training for a full-blown confrontation, an influential group has warned, as the war of words between Moscow and the west translates into military planning.

The warning comes from the European Leadership Network, which comprises former military figures, politicians and policymakers. On Wednesday, it will present an analysis of recent military exercises by the two blocs that indicates each is “preparing for the worst”.

The stark assessment from a group made up of dozens of former generals and defence and foreign ministers highlights a fracture in which both sides have ramped up their military posturing in recent months.

The ELN analysed the stage-by-stage deployment of units in the two biggest military war games this year — Nato’s Allied Shield exercises and Russia’s “snap” drills — to assess dispositions and strategic thinking on both sides.

Both exercises were officially designed with hypothetical opponents in mind but “the nature and scale of the operations indicate otherwise”, the ELN report will say. “Each side is clearly training with the other side’s capabilities and war plans in mind.”

Russia’s snap exercises in March involved 80,000 men, including soldiers from airborne and Spetsnaz special units, 12,000 vehicles and 220 aircraft in an operation that spanned the country’s European border and in its far north.

This involved the deployment of paratroopers to sensitive sites, naval battles and operations to defend military command centres, including one simulated commando raid on the headquarters of the Northern Fleet near Murmansk. Such efforts could be intended with Nato in mind, the ELN said.

Nato’s exercises in eastern Europe were also focused on a single adversary. The far smaller effort was an amalgamation of four previously distinct exercises conducted by the alliance involving 15,000 troops, geared around a scenario involving the invasion of a

Nato member state and a rapid response to it. Nato planners have been scrambling to dust off cold war-era logistical plans to allow the movement of huge amounts of materiel across Europe.

The deployment in June of the alliance's high-readiness task force for the first time was built around a scenario modelled on Russia's covert military operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

"Since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis we have had an intensification of exercises and an increase in their scope," said Lukasz Kulesa, ELN research director.

"Russia is increasing the combat readiness of its forces and aiming to send a number of messages to Nato. The Russian machinery has proved it can move with much more ease than Nato. Nato is adapting to that . . . it's still somewhere in between . . . treating Russia as an opponent full-scale, which would mean Nato exercises would need to be much more broad and significant."

With Russia and Nato set to increase the level of their war games, Mr Kulesa warned of a further deterioration in relations if no detente can be brokered.

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