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Towards a More Stable NATO-Russia Relationship

EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY REPORT

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Towards a More Stable Russia-NATO Relationship

Executive Summary

The NATO-Russia confrontation is likely to last for years. It is in the interests of both parties to make relations more stable and less costly. Such efforts should not be seen as a reward but as a sensible precaution. Dialogue about risk reduction does not mean accepting the other side's arguments or status. But such an engagement allows each side to move from reacting to the other's 'bad behaviour' towards addressing it.

This joint report by the European Leadership Network and the Russian International Affairs Council does not recommend how to overcome the confrontation but, rather, how to make it safer. It offers practical, realistic, politically viable recommendations distilled from discussions on the art of the possible which were conducted in Moscow, NATO Headquarters and several NATO capitals.

Given the limited common ground that remains between the two sides, this report's recommendations are similarly limited. But that does not make them any less important. Feasible and implementable steps to reduce risks are in short supply. A better controlled confrontation offers higher long-term chances of moving to a better place.

The report suggests two sets of recommendations. The first is a **"basic dialogue and stabilisation menu" for immediate implementation**. Its main elements are:

- **A more useful quality of dialogue**: a more predictable rhythm of NATO-Russia Council meetings; more substantial Russian representation; more military-to-military communication channels; the use of the NATO-Russia hotline for cyber-incidents.

- **More substance to dialogue**: NATO to clarify the acceptable scope of contacts; Russia to address the credibility gap; both sides to use experts in the NATO-Russia Council for a risk reduction exercise and cyber advice.

- **Extending dialogue beyond official contacts:** non-official fora used for debate, simulations, generating ideas and better mutual understanding of narratives and history. Resume very limited parliamentary contact, and promote contacts between academic researchers and analysts.

These steps would modestly reduce the risks of misunderstanding, miscalculation and escalation as well as decrease the action-reaction pressure that deepens the confrontation and makes progress harder. They might open some political space for further stabilising steps.

The report also offers a second, more ambitious **"enhanced set"** of recommendations. Unfortunately, **we do not see these "enhanced" recommendations as implementable in the current phase of confrontation**. Rather, they indicate a way forward if some of the "basic" steps are implemented and the political climate improves:

- **Enhanced quality of dialogue:** higher level NATO-Russia Council meetings and additional NATO-Russia Council formats on cyber and on military doctrines and postures;

- **More substance to the dialogue**: refresh the "rules of the road" in the relationship; take

declaratory or clarificatory steps;

- **Restraint on the ground**: agree on transparency of sub-strategic nuclear postures; jointly consider a zone of increased transparency or reduced military activity;

- **A positive agenda**: work on issues of mutual interest; return to cooperation on arms control; pursue joint Russian and Western non-governmental (Track 2) and semi-official (Track 1.5) projects and dialogues focusing on enhancing international security.

I.   NATO-Russia relations: why muddling through is not good enough

The NATO-Russia confrontation is set to last for years, stemming as it does from the violent clash of worldviews between the Russian and Western leaderships. Each side holds to deeply-rooted but contradictory narratives about the threat, transgressions and wrongs inflicted by the other (see Annex 2). The loss of trust between Russia and NATO countries is profound, reflected in the ongoing, reactive and expensive process of enhancing their forces and capabilities.

> ## *"The loss of trust between Russia and NATO countries is profound."*

The starting point of this report is the observation that the risk of unintended escalation into a NATO-Russia conflict is serious enough to warrant a fresh examination into the ways in which the existing deterrence relationship can be made more stable.

There are several reasons for such a judgement.

Objectively, this is a confrontation between the powers wielding some 97% of the world's nuclear weapons,[1] with – in aggregate – the largest armed forces on the planet. Security challenges on the ground are substantial as both parties increasingly conduct military activities in the same or adjacent regions and see each other's forces as opponents. The threshold for the use of force may be falling with the spread of "grey zone" deniable or proxy operations. Established rules of the road for deterrence and well-understood red lines have become increasingly blurred or are missing altogether, especially in new domains such as cyber or new-old domains such as information operations. Moreover, the activities of third parties can profoundly affect the NATO-Russia relationship.

In many areas of the deterrence relationship,

a more efficient dialogue is a necessary early step to making the confrontation safer. For deterrence measures to be properly designed, the adversary's values, interests, intentions and actions as well as its estimate of its opponent's resolve and capabilities must be properly understood. Equally, for deterrence to be effective, what you signal to the adversary must be understood by them. Robust reactions to the other side's 'bad behaviour' have their place in signalling determination but risk being seen as provocation if they are not proportionate and/or are poorly communicated, potentially leading to more 'bad behaviour'. And to deal with the escalatory consequences of miscalculation or misunderstanding, credible channels of communication are essential.

At the same time, the space for dialogue to clarify questions and avoid misunderstandings or misjudgements is shrinking as the communication channels are limited. Procedures to handle incidents, avoid escalation and mitigate risks are either non-existent or insufficient. There is less dialogue now than in the later stages of the Cold War. Cold War know-how on how to deal with crises is fading, and new wisdom on conducting adversarial dialogue and managing crises is needed, especially for the newly emerging areas of competition.

Report's goals

On a number of issues pertaining to European security, NATO and Russian positions are diametrically opposed, with no room for compromise. Beyond perceptions and narratives, there are also hard facts. These differences over the unacceptability of the other side's behaviour have to be acknowledged, as they form the framework within which any recommendations for stabilising the relationship will be considered.

Accordingly, this report does not suggest that any shortcuts exist to restore trust or end the confrontation. It does not seek to suggest

equivalence in the two sides' behaviours: neither side would accept equal responsibility with the other for the confrontation. It simply observes that this **confrontation could be managed in more stable ways at lower risk and cost**, and it offers recommendations on how this could be done.

Stability in NATO-Russia relations would be enhanced by more considered efforts to complement deterrence with focused, purposeful dialogue aimed at reducing the risks of accident, misjudgement or miscalculation potentially leading to damaging escalation. As the confrontation is likely to persist, it makes perfect sense to seek to pursue it with the least possible risk and cost to one's own side.

We suggest that such an approach would be in the interest of *both* sides. Each will remain convinced that the other is to blame for the deterioration of the relationship. Each may consider that they can only defend themselves from the hostile actions of the other by showing that they are ready to respond effectively to any escalation.

> ## *"It is possible to maintain a principled position while managing the risks jointly."*

At the same time, each side expects to outlast the other - each sees time as being on its side. So the calculus for each side should be to manage the competition as safely and inexpensively as they can over the long haul. A distinction must also be drawn between seeking to de-stabilise the opponent – of which each already suspects the other – and instability in the strategic relationship with the other. Russia, for example, may see advantage in driving wedges into the NATO Alliance and fostering instability in the domestic politics of NATO Allies and yet retain an active, even strategic, interest in stability in its deterrence relations with NATO. It may well perceive NATO countries as having a comparable position.

This report also aims to demonstrate that it is possible to maintain a principled position while managing the risks jointly. The US-Soviet Cold War nuclear risk reduction and arms control measures or the more recent US-Russia deconfliction arrangements in Syria are examples of this. Agreements on transparency and confidence building measures negotiated at the height of the Cold War confrontation offer further templates. Stabilising steps need not signal a softening by either side of their principles and political position or become a slippery slope to "business as usual". They can be paralleled by continued firmness. Indeed, in NATO's case, during the Cold War the demands of dialogue with the Warsaw Pact enforced a collective discipline and clarity of signalling that is now absent. In the Soviet case, pursuing détente was possible despite the opposition of the domestic hardliners – which nowadays might provide a positive reminder to Russia. Dialogue on deterrence stability will not be seen by each side's own domestic audience as a reward for past behaviour or legitimisation of the other side, unless the mistake is made of presenting it as such.

Report's approach

The report draws on the insights of, and debate among, 13 senior NATO and 17 Russian experts at workshop meetings in Moscow (July 2018) and in Brussels (November 2018). It is also based on extensive interviews with officials and experts[2] in Moscow, NATO HQ and selected NATO capitals. Annex 3 includes more information on the project.

From these exchanges has come a long menu of possible actions that could be taken to increase stability in the NATO-Russia relationship. These ideas have then been winnowed down and sharpened up by being tested with relevant officials. Certainly, not all participants in this dialogue have been able to accept all the recommendations. These are offered solely on the responsibility of

the ELN and RIAC team that has produced them, aiming to summarize the ideas of the experts. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the members of either the European Leadership Network or the Russian International Affairs Council.

This report is perhaps unusual in trying only to suggest ways to manage the confrontation better, not fix it. We have also constrained our recommendations in another unusual way. Instead of proposing what each side *should* do to increase stability in the relationship, we have concentrated on what they actually *could* do in the current circumstances.

We recognise that any steps to stabilize the NATO-Russia relationship will be taken by governments who are deeply suspicious of the other side. Deterrence, not engagement, is primarily on their mind. Where NATO collectively is concerned, many steps can only be taken by consensus. So we have sought to make our recommendations *practical, realistic and politically feasible.*

Since there is very little common ground, our recommendations are correspondingly limited. But that does not diminish their value. On the contrary, recommendations that can actually be implemented are in short supply. Many in Russia have given up on initiatives towards the West because they consider the task so difficult and NATO's position so unpromising. Many in NATO consider Russia's behaviour to be so inconsistent with any real wish to reduce the risks and costs of confrontation that there are no prudent ways to improve things. So even small steps would be an achievement.

> *"We have sought to make our recommendations practical, realistic and politically feasible."*

Accordingly, this report first introduces a set of recommendations that could improve the NATO-Russia dialogue within the current

narrow settings. These recommendations are thus both realistic and politically feasible. Next, we have included a second set of recommendations about the steps that might be considered if greater political will is found to address the instabilities in the relationship. These recommendations are still modest but they are more challenging: they may be realistic but at present they are not politically feasible.

II. Basic Dialogue and Stabilisation Menu

There are functioning channels of communication between NATO and Russia, including meetings of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) at ambassadorial level. But these channels are of limited effectiveness. The intensity of NATO-Russia contacts has been drastically reduced following Russia's actions against Ukraine and NATO's subsequent April 2014 decision to suspend practical cooperation with Russia. With increased military activities and what each side perceives as pressure or probing of its limits and 'red lines' by the other, whether intended or not, the existing communication channels are inadequate and insufficient to clarify concerns or deal with uncertainties, especially during periods of increased tension. The level of mutual understanding between Russia and NATO is low, and the deterrence signalling of each side can be misunderstood by the other side or dismissed by them as posturing.

NATO and Russia will have to navigate better a space filled with substantial and genuine disagreements, ballooning mistrust regarding the other side's intentions, and continued prioritisation of deterrence and strengthening of respective military potentials.

In navigating safely, the priority should thus be given to "deepening" and multiplying the current channels of communication and making the best possible use of the existing instruments such as the NRC or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its Structured Dialogue. None of the actions suggested below would breach the 'red lines' constraining the conduct of the bilateral relationship, as currently understood by NATO or Russia. They can be also pursued in parallel with efforts to utilise better all other available instruments such as the OSCE-wide and bilateral confidence-building measures and the Open Skies Treaty. These proposals may appear trivial or modest, but their implementation would mark an improvement in comparison with the current situation, moving Russia and NATO towards more stability and predictability.

Better quality of dialogue

While respecting the existing limitations, for example regarding NATO's *de facto* decision not to resume working-group level NRC contacts, the following measures could be pursued:

•   **Schedule regular meetings of the NRC at the level of ambassadors**

Between 2014 and 2018, ten meetings of the NATO-Russia Council were held. Three took place in both 2016 and 2017 and two in 2018.[3] Topics included the situation in and around Ukraine (featured as the fixed first point of the agenda); transparency and risk reduction in the context of military activities, other issues of concern including the situation in Afghanistan, aviation security in the Baltic region, hybrid challenges or the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

While this may suggest increased efficiency of contacts, the exact timing and agenda has had to be laboriously negotiated each time before the NRC met. The infrequent and ad-hoc character of the meetings increases the risk of important concerns not being raised in a timely way or of falling off the agenda. It does not give enough scope to prepare the meetings, ensure proper follow-up, or develop any positive dynamics between them.

Setting a firm timetable with a specified number of regular meetings (either bi-monthly or quarterly, with additional emergency meetings scheduled as needed) would provide more consistency, avoid divisive deliberations on the timing, make the channel less vulnerable to political storms and allow more continuity of work.

As Chairman, the NATO Secretary General could take a more leading role in setting the agenda, with NATO's Deputy Secretary General working with the Russian Permanent Representation to develop the preparatory materials for the meetings.

The first NRC meeting in 2019 took place on 25th January, with the INF Treaty crisis high on its agenda. While there was no progress on resolving the crisis, the meeting illustrated the need to discuss issues of mutual importance in a timely and efficient manner.

- **Russia to ensure ambassadorial level representation at the NRC**

Since January 2018, there has been no Russian ambassador to NATO.[4] Such a long gap without a senior Russian diplomat with a direct connection to Moscow's decision-making circles hinders a constructive dialogue in the NRC and seems to signal Russian disinterest in improving relations with NATO. It may also hamper communication during any period of increased tension.

Russia could immediately appoint a Permanent Representative to NATO to signal the importance of maintaining relations and make sustained engagement possible. Alternatively, Russia could assign one of the two Russian ambassadors currently in Brussels (one responsible for bilateral relations and one for the European Union) to take over responsibility for the NATO portfolio, or appoint a Moscow-based ambassador to participate in the NRC meetings. Even under the NATO limits on the Russian delegation, Russia could also bring in more senior diplomats, military and civilian experts to brief the NRC on topics of mutual interest and to prepare its meetings. The participation of Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in the January 2019 NRC meeting was a welcome development.

- **Ensure that there are multiple channels of military-to-military communication**

More military-to-military contacts would add to the stability of the relationship by improving understanding of the other, offering options on channels to be used in a crisis and creating some trust at a personal level. Dialogue and technical contacts between the uniformed personnel of Russia and NATO should not be a victim of lack of trust at the political level. So far, there have been sporadic telephone conversations and direct meetings between the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces General Valery Gerasimov and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Curtis Scaparrotti, as well as with previous Chairman of the NATO Military Committee General Petr Pavel.

"More military-to-military contacts would add to the stability of the relationship."

The new Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach could re-establish communication with the Russian Chief of the General Staff, in parallel with the existing SACEUR-Gerasimov channel. Based on a clear political mandate with a clearly understood separation of functions, these contacts could be made routine and prepared at deputies' level. While the SACEUR-Gerasimov channel could focus on the most pressing military activities, operations-related issues and current concerns, the Peach-Gerasimov exchanges could focus on more political and longer-term questions related to military doctrines, postures, development of capabilities and concepts of operations. Improved and multiple contacts would serve as another instrument to clarify concerns, increase transparency and build up mutual understanding and personal trust.

- **Use the existing NATO-Russia hotline in case of serious cyber incidents**

NATO and Russia lack established joint procedures to deal with serious cyber-incidents and allegations of cyber-attacks, despite the fact that these can have disastrous consequences and despite the

increase in the scale and sophistication of cyber-attacks, sometimes attributed to states. In some cases, particular NATO states and Russia would rather use bilateral instruments to communicate and react, but in case of a major or widespread attacks against military targets, it may be useful to have the possibility to interact at the NATO-Russia level as well.

Due to the technical nature of any conversation about a potential incident, a separate cyber incidents hotline between NATO and Russia may be preferable. Since this may not be feasible to set up, the already existing NATO-Russia military-to-military hotline should also be activated in the event of a cyber-contingency. Both NATO and Russia could agree that they would be prepared to use the hotline for that purpose, and that issue-experts would be available to advise the leadership of each side in case of its activation. The use of the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres in Washington and Moscow to facilitate inquiries about cybersecurity incidents could serve as a blueprint.

While it would not solve the bigger problem of establishing rules and norms in the cyber-domain, the hotline would help to control the risk of escalation in the event of a serious cyber-attack against a NATO member state or Russia conducted by a third party or a non-state entity. It could become crucial in such cases to prevent a false attribution of the attack and retaliation against the wrong target.

More substance to dialogue

Increasing the frequency of NATO-Russia meetings or military-to-military contacts would have limited impact unless the two sides look anew at the topics and potential of the conversation. While not requiring any major policy changes, these recommenda-tions would enable both sides to reflect on their goals for NATO-Russia relations:

- **NATO's homework: clarify the content of 'no business as usual'**

NATO Allies want to avoid any impression of getting back to what they call "business as usual" with Moscow, in other words resuming cooperation with Russia while putting aside the current disagreements, notably over Ukraine. Without a clearer meaning of the term, however, any activity or topics beyond the current agenda can be presented as crossing the line. At the same time, individual NATO states continue, to varying degrees, to pursue bilateral contacts with Russia on topics of mutual interest. That may with time create a gap between limited exchanges at the NATO-Russia level and closer engagement at national level in some cases. It may therefore be in NATO's interest to review its approach to dialogue.

The North Atlantic Council could clarify through internal discussion what NATO understands by "no business as usual" and "no practical cooperation" with Russia. While clearly delineating areas of no engagement (for example, no cooperation on sensitive issues like missile defence or joint exercises), that could open up space and give an impetus for *business that needs to be done*. This could include increased political and military-to-military contacts, risk reduction measures, arrangements for crisis prevention and management, and engagement in confidence-building and arms control talks with Russia.

- **Russia's homework: address the credibility gap in its dialogue offers towards NATO**

While Russia maintains that it makes attempts to pragmatically engage the Alliance and its members, including on crisis management, and is open to resumption of working-level contacts, it has a serious credibility problem. Many Allies see Moscow as not engaging seriously on some issues (such as specific questions on military exercises or military build-up), cherry-picking topics or making proposals

calculated to divide the Alliance rather than to be constructive. NATO also frequently claims that Russia's actions on the ground are inconsistent with its engagement initiatives.

Russian decision-makers are certainly entitled to conclude that dialogue with NATO is pointless. But if they are going to engage in dialogue at all, and especially if they are interested in stabilising the relationship with NATO and addressing the threat of escalation, they will need to reflect on the effectiveness of their overall approach towards NATO and its member states. A review could ensure that diplomatic overtures are not unintentionally undermined by assertive propaganda or military moves on the ground. Regarding specific topics, Moscow could provide credible information on its military activities at the NRC briefings and constructively address more of the questions raised by the NATO side.

- **Run a Table Top Exercise on the Management of Air Incidents**

Significant steps have already been taken to reduce risks of collision between military and civilian aircraft (for example, through the Baltic Sea Project Team and the International Civil Aviation Organization), but more should be done in the military-to-military sphere where dangerous incidents continue to be an issue.[5] While so far escalation has been avoided, real-time management of an incident or accident involving the air forces of NATO countries and Russia would prove to be challenging, as the November 2015 Turkey-Russia incident demonstrated.

A table top exercise focused on air accident/incident response could develop a much needed procedural knowledge for handling such situations. A non-governmental panel of experts could be convened from both sides (including retired senior military with the requisite expertise, as well as civil aviation experts) to scope the problem, run a table top exercise with scenarios involving reacting to an air incident or accident, and prepare recommendations. Such a panel

could report to the NRC, with results made available to the OSCE and other interested organisations. This exercise could provide a blueprint for perfecting procedures (such as the preparation of a code of conduct) that could be discussed at the governmental level in order to improve the handling of air incidents.

- **Invite experts to brief the NRC on cyberspace regulations**

The scope for advancing NATO-Russia discussion on crisis stability by acting "from within" the NRC seems limited. This is particularly true for the cyber domain, where the NRC conversation so far has apparently been unproductive. At the same time, the need for greater regulation of cyberspace activities is growing more acute, and a number of international initiatives have been launched to work on solutions.

"The need for greater regulation of cyberspace activities is growing more acute."

To move forward the discussions related to the cyber domain within the NRC, it may be beneficial to draw on the experience of external experts such as members of the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security[6] or the Global Commission on the Stability of Cyberspace (GCSC).[7]

When it comes to air safety, the briefing by the Baltic Sea Project Team helped the NRC to better comprehend the topic. Similarly, independent cyberspace experts could brief the NRC on their work and lessons-learned, making recommendations relevant to the NRC which could be further discussed by the Council.

Intensifying NATO-Russia dialogue beyond the official government level contacts

There are contacts between individual experts, think tanks and academic experts from Russia and NATO countries, as well as sporadic joint initiatives. Yet deterioration of the relationship has increased the tendency to instrumentalise expert discussions as opportunities for trading accusations rather than for engaging in a constructive dialogue. This seems to consolidate rather than help to overcome the existing diplomatic stalemate.

Non-governmental initiatives and those with the informal participation of officials do not always require official blessing or implicate governmental positions yet can provide valuable insights and suggestions for inter-governmental work. They can operate at a more technical level, outside the political limelight.

Initiatives to consider could include setting up a "Track 2 NATO-Russia Council" of NGOs, think tanks and scientific organisations; establishing a group of retired officials and experts to advise the officials on both sides, or setting up a Wise Persons Study Panel to offer recommendations on the future of the NATO-Russia relationship. Additionally, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Bureau could maintain contacts with the Russian Parliament in order to cultivate dialogue and explore the potential of ad-hoc meetings.

> ### "Significant value-added can be derived from joint similations."

Significant value-added can be derived from joint simulations (table top exercises, war games or scenario-based discussions) involving experts, former officials and retired military from NATO states, partners and Russia. For example, simulations with the participation of retired officials and officers could "test" responses to a developing crisis between NATO and Russia, examine escalation scenarios and crisis management procedures. Such exercises could help assess the dangers of inadvertent escalation, the likelihood or otherwise of a rapid move to a devastating conflict, and the adequacy of the current communication arrangements. A potential post-INF Treaty escalation of tensions in Europe caused by deployments of INF Treaty-class missiles could serve as one possible scenario.

On another track, taking the Polish-Russian project "White Spots—Black Spots: Difficult Matters in Polish-Russian Relations" as a point of departure, a semi-official study of the history of NATO-Russian relations could be initiated. The participation of historians from NATO countries and Russia, with a broad access to archives, could help to analyse the roots of some misunderstandings and myths about the past, or at least illuminate better the conflicting narratives and historical perspectives

III. Taking one step further in stabilising NATO-Russia relations

The limited character of the recommendations in the previous section stems from a realistic assessment of what is feasible in the current circumstances. NATO's and Russia's approaches to their relationship are based on deeply-held views about the other side and their own interests. It is difficult to see how the present confrontational relationship can be significantly improved unless its trajectory is changed by internal developments or external events.

The simplest but also least likely scenario for improvement would be a major re-conceptualisation of the relationship on either side. From NATO's perspective, the change on Russia's side would most likely need to include reversing the policy decisions of recent years including the annexation of Crimea, restraint in its force deployments and exercises, ceasing Russia's destabilisation campaign, accepting NATO as a partner rather than a threat, reversing Moscow's negative stance on NATO's enlargement and addressing the numerous issues brought up by the Allies. From Russia's perspective, such a change would probably have to involve NATO accepting Russia's recent territorial gains, significantly restraining its military activities along its Eastern flank, and accepting a halt on Eastern enlargement and limitations on partnerships with countries bordering Russia. It is implausible to expect either side to make such a dramatic U-turn.

It may thus be more realistic to envisage increased stabilisation of the relationship as stemming from a gradual build-up of greater predictability between NATO and Russia. Implementation of the recommendations from the previous section would be one step in that direction. Parallel progress on resolving some of the contentious issues, such as the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, the situation in the Azov Sea, or the INF Treaty, would be another. A partial "détente" would mean a slow, careful and reversible broadening of the areas of engagement, dealing with some of the sharpest points of difference and avoidance of new tensions.

> *"A partial 'détente' would mean a slow, careful and reversible broadening of the areas of engagement."*

If and when political space opens up that makes such increased engagement possible, maintaining movement would require both sides to respond step-by-step to the opportunity. That supports the case for having 'in the air' ideas that have already to some extent been sifted. These might range from additional channels of communication, potential political pledges, declaratory measures, or crisis management procedures, to initiating limited cooperation on issues of mutual interest.

Our exercise identified a short menu of ideas that did not meet the requirement of immediate political feasibility but that were nonetheless seen as practical and realistic enough that they might become applicable at a certain point. If they were implemented, NATO-Russia relations would still be adversarial but would be much more stable and somewhat less expensive.

Enhanced quality of dialogue

Assuming new willingness on both sides to move beyond the current model of NATO-Russia dialogue, the following measures can be suggested:

- **Convene a high-level NRC meeting to provide direction**

Summit and ministerial-level contacts are not excluded by the April 2014 NATO Foreign Ministers decision on suspending practical cooperation with Moscow.[8] Many NATO

Allies would currently see a ministerial level NRC as a totally unacceptable 'reward' to Moscow. But in other circumstances such a meeting could be reframed not as 'business as usual' but as 'business that needs to be done' to provide direction in reducing risk in a continuing adversarial relationship. It might be convened, for example, to address the 'rules of the road' for stability or even to give momentum to a stabilisation and de-escalation process.

- **Establish a dialogue on cyber activities within the NRC**

There are no commonly accepted rules guiding NATO-Russia conduct in cyberspace and response towards hostile cyber activities. At the same time, there are several cyber-related risks and challenges relevant to the NATO-Russia relationship: the risk of cross-domain escalation; the risk to command and control, communication, and early warning systems; the possibility of wrong or politicised attribution of a cyber-attack; the problem of third-party attacks and the lack of deterrence rules in cyber space. A formal dialogue could serve transparency, confidence building and risk reduction.

NATO and Russia could establish an NRC Cybersecurity Working Group to discuss possible risks involved in cyber activities and ways to mitigate their escalation. This certainly falls into the category of 'business that needs to be done'. This group could start by working on a cyber-domain glossary of terms. Both parties could also work on a prohibition of cyber-attacks on command and control infrastructure. NATO and Russia could also use the working group to provide some transparency regarding their cyber policies and the mechanisms and criteria they will use to assess alleged cyber-attacks.

In the event of any future updates of the Tallinn Manual, which aims to identify rules for cyberspace activities, the facilitator – the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence – could potentially invite Russian experts to participate, in order to broaden the range of the exercise.

- **Reactivate NATO-Russia dialogue on military doctrines and postures**

U.S./NATO and Russian conventional and nuclear doctrines are perceived by the other side as escalatory and threatening. Using the regular NRC format to discuss conventional and nuclear doctrines and postures could help each side to understand the other side's perceptions better.

Reactivation and re-purposing of the NRC Defence Transparency, Strategy and Reform Working Group (DTSR) could provide a natural venue for routine exchanges of information and views about nuclear and conventional military postures, doctrines and strategies. Such exchanges – more focused than discussions on similar topics at the OSCE between its 57 participating States – could help each side assess the concerns of the other. This would help to replace guessing with clarifying concerning the elements of doctrines and postures that raise particular concerns on the other side.

More substance to dialogue

There are currently important limitations imposed by both NATO and Russia regarding the substance of dialogue. Even re-confirmation of past pledges seems difficult. But if these restrictions could be overcome, NATO and Russia could discuss the following issues:

- **Refresh the foundations of NATO-Russia relations**

Mistrust and competing narratives define the current state of NATO-Russia relations. As part of any easing of confrontation, NATO and Russia would need to work towards agreeing a foundation for a safer adversarial relationship.

While continuing to operate within the framework of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and the 2002 Rome Declaration, NATO and Russia could reach a basic understanding on interim "rules of the game." Reaffirming shared basics of the current relationship could not only reduce risk but enable all sides to make better progress on specific issues in the NRC, the OSCE, and in ad hoc and bilateral settings. The recommendations offered by the Task Force on Cooperation in Greater Europe, a select group of senior statesmen and women drawn from the key states of greater Europe, in their paper *Towards a NATO-Russia Basic Understanding*, could serve as a starting point.[9]

- **Declare the absence of aggressive intentions**

Given the context of their relationship, NATO and Russia shape their military doctrines and planning with regard to the other side's capabilities, and often assume worst-case scenarios regarding intentions. There are elements of their doctrines and postures that create scope for misunderstanding and that could cause rapid and uncontrollable escalation during a Russia-NATO crisis. Declarations of restraint could offer some predictability and reinforce the new basic understanding discussed above.

NATO and Russia could issue general statements, preferably identical, on the absence of aggressive intentions towards the other side. These could be reinforced by specific pledges:

(a) U.S. and Russia restating the 1984 Reykjavik formula between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev that "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought",[10]

(b) NATO and Russian re-statements that they have no plans and no intentions to violate the other side's borders,[11]

(c) NATO restating that it has "no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear

weapons on the territory of new members,"[12]

(d) further, more formal high-level Russian assurances of the absence of the "escalate to deescalate" concept in Russia's nuclear doctrine.[13]

A separate set of pledges could address limiting the fallout from a collapse of the INF Treaty and working towards re-establishing stability in the aftermath. The North Atlantic Council could formalise the pledge that it does not intend to deploy intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe. In parallel, Russia could announce that it will not deploy INF Treaty-range nuclear missiles directed against Europe.

- **Confirm the relevance of and define the terms of "substantial combat forces" and parallel Russian restraint pledges**

Only a regular dialogue can address concerns regarding current force postures and doctrines in the necessary depth. But there is still value in re-stating past pledges. Negotiations and a joint NATO-Russian agreement on the modern definition of "additional substantial combat forces" as it applies to NATO,[14] as well as on Russia's restraint pledges regarding its forces deployed in the Kaliningrad and Pskov areas,[15] would provide much-needed clarification on the limits to military build-ups.[16] They would also increase the potential for further positive movement in the relationship.

"There is still value in re-stating past pledges."

While NATO and Russia could publish unilateral statements regarding their understandings of the terms, a joint statement would have the strongest impact in terms of providing stability and preventing further accusations of military build-up.

Restraint on the ground

There are a number of NGO proposals regarding restraint in the deployment of military units and new military capabilities by NATO states and Russia, especially in sensitive areas such as the Baltic Sea or Black Sea regions.[17] At present, such proposals seem unimplementable. To the NATO countries concerned, especially those bordering Russia, these proposals might be considered to limit their options to defend themselves. NATO as such does not yet seem ready to entertain such ideas. Russia is eager to discuss limitations on the NATO side, but does not yet seem ready to further limit its own military freedom of action within its borders and in conflict zones. However, if and when there is movement in NATO-Russia relations, the topic of restraint could be tackled in a mutually satisfactory manner by agreeing on the following.

- **Exercise restraint and transparency of sub-strategic nuclear postures**

Stockpiles of sub-strategic nuclear weapons constitute a point of military asymmetry (with significant Russian superiority in warhead numbers and delivery systems) and are a source of enduring political controversy between NATO and Russia. Reliance on dual-use delivery systems, reduced warning-time and an uncertain threshold for use – considered by some experts to be lower than in the case of strategic systems – put this category of weapons in the spotlight.

Assuming that reducing this area of nuclear ambiguity would not be seen as diminishing nuclear deterrence, NATO and Russia could undertake unilateral activities aimed at clarifying elements of their sub-strategic nuclear postures prone to be misread by the other side.

Russia could provide more information on its sub-strategic nuclear weapons, including declaring the nature and readiness level of its nuclear forces and stockpiles in close vicinity to NATO territory, like the Kaliningrad and Pskov Oblasts, and pledge not to increase them. It could also provide updated information about its implementation of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives with regard to sub-strategic nuclear forces reductions and storage.

> *"Russia could provide more information on its sub-strategic nuclear weapons."*

NATO, for its part, could openly list the countries with roles in its nuclear mission, including countries hosting nuclear weapons, provide more details on the readiness level of its dual-capable aircraft and pledge not to involve further nations in nuclear sharing.

Additionally, NATO and Russia could invite the other side's observers to their "response to a nuclear incident" exercises and joint post-exercise discussions. Both could also work further on improving the coherence of their communication strategies for nuclear signalling in peace time and in crisis.

- **Create a Russia-NATO zone of increased transparency and/or reduced military activities**

Given the current military modernisation and troop build-ups and the level of mistrust between NATO and Russia, the most stabilising but also the most challenging option would be the establishment of a zone of increased transparency and/or reduced military activities on each side of the shared border. This could be seen as the major achievement and culmination of any NATO-Russia process of stabilising the confrontation - rather than as a starting point.

The most ambitious (and correspondingly most contentious) approach could be an agreement on a restraint and limitation regime covering parts of the Baltic Sea area as the most likely theatre of escalation. This

would involve Russia considerably lowering the intensity of its military activities in its Western Military District and pledging not to strengthen its forces in the Kaliningrad and Pskov regions, with NATO pledging the same for their forces in a region to be defined. The temporary deployment of additional forces would only be possible for exercises and emergencies, and a military activities-free area on both sides of the border could also be agreed.

Increasing the transparency of military activities and deployments in the zone rather than limiting them would be another approach. This could include wider notification of all major military exercises, broader invitation of observers, immediate notification and special provisions for the snap observation of unannounced exercises, broad information exchange on military forces and deployments, and additional evaluation visits and inspections. Separate information-exchange and notification arrangements (naval CSBMs) could be agreed for the Baltic Sea.[18]

Developing a positive agenda of cooperation

This may be difficult to imagine in the current circumstances, but NATO and Russia share a history of cooperation in a number of areas which could to some extent be resumed if the overall relationship improved. Conceivably, future international developments could also bring the two sides closer together or even force them to cooperate as has partially been the case over Afghanistan.

- **Limited cooperation on issues of mutual interest**

Risk reduction and crisis management should continue to be the focus of the NRC dialogue. Simultaneously, NATO and Russia could explore areas of possible convergence in order to gain a better understanding of each other's policies and activities and to defuse tensions in countries and regions

such as Afghanistan, the Middle East, Africa or the Western Balkans. They could also look for common points in their approaches to countering terrorism, piracy, space, peacekeeping operations, dealing with civil contingencies such as natural or man-made disasters, and new military technologies.

Third parties could be useful facilitators of contacts. For example, NATO and Russia could consider a joint disaster management exercise in Serbia. Between 8th-11th October 2018, Serbia's Interior Ministry and NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) jointly organised the consequence management field exercise "SRBIJA 2018." The aim, based on an earthquake scenario, was to improve interoperability in international disaster response operations. The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in the Serbian town of Niš also deals with training for emergency response. A joint exercise in the framework of NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, initiated by Serbia, could take into account each side's sensitivities and contribute to the development of joint disaster management procedures.

On Afghanistan, NATO and Russia could do more to exchange assessments on the situation and to discuss whether some shared concerns could be tackled jointly. For example, both parties could return to their successful cooperation in providing training to the Afghan police and counter-narcotics forces.

- **Re-investing in cooperative arms control**

Existing arms control and confidence building regimes do not function properly. Their renewal and modernisation could play a major role in stabilising NATO-Russian relations as they support elements of the relationship most relevant to conflict prevention and crisis management: maintaining stability, predictability and transparency. Making a greater effort to stop and reverse the further erosion of existing arms control

and transparency-and-confidence-building agreements could thus be one of the main goals for NATO and Russia in this phase.

In particular, this re-investment could involve generating OSCE-wide consensus on modernising and strengthening the Vienna Document. On another note, the NATO-Russia dialogue could support Russian and US efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the mutual accusations regarding the INF Treaty, or the identification of an arms control instrument or instruments to replace it.

IV. The Way Forward

The measures suggested in this report would be beneficial for both Russia and NATO. But even if all were implemented, both sides would still need to decide whether the state of a well-managed confrontation they would find themselves in is the optimal solution for the decades to come.

This report has not addressed so far the issue of leadership in implementing the recommendations. The current U.S. leadership is unlikely to play a leading role in stabilising NATO-Russia relations as we have proposed. The US appears determined to demonstrate to Russia that it can prevail in a political confrontation and it expects Moscow to yield. Russia insists on its readiness to engage the Alliance on a broad range of issues, but its motives are deeply suspected. So it would need to overcome the credibility gap described earlier if it really wanted its initiatives to be picked up by the other side.

Thus the onus lies on Canada and the European NATO members - those supportive of more dialogue and those wary of closer engagement with Russia. Since Europe would be the zone in which any major escalation of US-Russia or NATO-Russia tensions would be played out, the European members of NATO should all be interested in this report's suggestions for stabilisation of the relationship.

Annex 1: The main recommendations

The main elements of the "basic stabilisation menu" are:

- *Quarterly meetings of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC)* at the level of ambassadors would allow for a regular, current discussion. Supported by the NATO Deputy Secretary General, the NATO Secretary General could exercise his authority to lead on setting the agenda, releasing all parties from the resource-intensive process of agreeing agendas ad hoc.

- *Ensure Russian ambassadorial level representation at the NRC* to signal the importance of mutual relations and to facilitate sustained engagement with NATO HQ and SHAPE.

- *Multiply channels of military-to-military communication* by setting up dialogue between the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee and the Russian Chief of General Staff to parallel the latter's line to SACEUR.

- Use the existing *NATO-Russia hotline* in the event of serious cyber incidents.

- The North Atlantic Council could clarify what it understands by the term *"no business as usual"* so that a space could open up for *"business that needs to be done."*

- Russia could *strengthen the credibility of its dialogue offer* towards NATO by engaging seriously and making constructive proposals based on de facto acceptance of NATO.

- Run a *Table Top Exercise on the Management of Hazardous Air Incidents* to road-test and improve real-live management procedures of an incident or accident involving air forces of NATO countries and Russia.

- Invite *experts to brief the NRC* on cyberspace regulations.

- Establish and foster *a constructive NATO-Russia Track 2* dialogue parallel to official Track 1 level contacts.

The main elements of the "enhanced menu" are:

- Re-establish additional formats for political discussion, for example by holding a *ministerial level NRC meeting* to give new momentum and direction to a stabilisation process.

- Establish a *NATO-Russia Cybersecurity Working Group* to work towards a shared understanding of the cyber-domain (through a cyber-domain glossary), a prohibition of cyber-attacks on command and control infrastructure and greater transparency on cyber attribution procedures.

- Reactivate NATO-Russia dialogue on military doctrines and postures, for example in the OSCE Structured Dialogue or through reactivation of the *NRC Defence Transparency, Strategy and Reform Working Group (DTSR)*.

- Recover the foundations of NATO-Russia relations by reaching a *basic understanding on interim "rules of the game."*

- Declare the absence of aggressive intentions and limit the potential fallout of the INF Treaty's demise.

- Confirm the relevance of and define the term *"substantial combat forces"* as well as parallel restraint pledges.

- Exercise *restraint and transparency of sub-strategic nuclear postures*.

- Establish a *Russian-NATO zone of increased transparency and/or reduced military activities*.

- Consider *limited cooperation on issues of mutual interest and/or concern*: Afghanistan, Africa, the Western Balkans, the Middle East, as well as approaches to countering piracy, peacekeeping operations, cyber, space, and new military technologies might all be considered.

- *Cultivate arms control.*

Annex 2: NATO-Russia: positions of the two sides

NATO's position vis-à-vis Russia

NATO accuses Russia of a number of aggressive actions, including the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, continued efforts to destabilise Eastern Ukraine and the use of a nerve agent on Alliance territory.[19] Member states believe that with its pattern of "reckless behaviour"[20] Russia intentionally undermines the rules-based order in Europe, most notably the principle of respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.[21] Individual NATO countries put the blame on Russia for specific activities frequently referred to as 'hybrid warfare', including interference with internal political affairs, espionage and cyber-attacks.

NATO also points to Russia's growing military assertiveness, provocative military activities and build-up of forces in the vicinity of NATO borders, which it deems a practical instrument of intimidation.[22] For example, NATO sees Russian "snap" military exercises as going beyond just testing the readiness of Russia's armed forces. For NATO, these drills are destabilising and potentially cloak permanent force redeployments or offensive operations.

Furthermore, NATO sees Moscow selectively implementing or exploiting loopholes in agreements aimed at creating transparency and confidence (e.g. the Vienna Document) and refusing to engage it their modernisation. It also accuses Russia of violating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.[23] These allegations further strengthen NATO's case that Russia is loosening its adherence to international law and commitments.

The Russian position vis-à-vis NATO

Both Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine[24] and its 2015 National Security Strategy[25] identify the United States and NATO as a 'risk' and a 'threat' to the Russian Federation and its interests. Russia sees NATO's previous rounds of enlargement, the Alliance's Open Door policy and its positioning of military infrastructure close to Russian territory as a destabilising geopolitical project and a direct threat to its security interests.[26]

Moscow also fears that through the build-up of a US "global"[27] missile defence system — in which NATO participates — Washington is undermining the strategic balance of power[28] and wants to encircle Russia.[29]

In the military sphere, Moscow voices concern over the increased frequency of NATO aerial reconnaissance actions, post-2014 build-up of forces along NATO's Eastern flank, and NATO's military exercises "near its border" with scenarios being based "on armed confrontation" with Russia.[30]

Annex 3: ELN-RIAC Project "Towards a more stable NATO-Russia relationship"

In early 2018 the European Leadership Network and the Russian International Affairs Council initiated a project aimed at identifying specific steps grounded in political reality that Russia, NATO and NATO members could take at the NATO-Russia and OSCE level to move towards a more stable relationship. The project does not offer a cure for NATO-Russia relations. Rather, it offers ideas to reduce the risks of deterrence failure, stabilise the relationship and chart a way to a face-saving reestablishment of a partial NATO-Russia dialogue. It also suggests what resumed dialogue and re-established cooperation could look like, even if that would need to be preceded by a change in the dynamics of Russia-West relations.

While similar exercises on relations between the West and Russia are undertaken elsewhere,[31] the ELN-RIAC dialogue adds an important dimension - *multilateralism*.

ELN and RIAC organised two seminars held in Moscow (July 2018) and Brussels (November 2018). The first workshop explored factors fuelling the instability in the NATO-Russia confrontation, escalatory elements of Russian and NATO military doctrines, threatening features of mutual deterrence signalling as well as destabilising elements of military deployments, new military capabilities and military exercises, mainly in the conventional and nuclear domains. The second seminar focused on non-kinetic threats to NATO-Russia stability and on areas that offer the greatest prospect of success in implementing stabilising steps.

The high-level seminar participants from NATO countries and Russia included retired diplomats, high ranking recently retired military personnel, former officials, representatives of think tanks and the academic community. Participants have enriched the debate and helped to refine ideas. They, however, do not bear any responsibility for this final report.

Beyond the seminars, ELN held private consultations with experts and officials in London, Berlin, Moscow and Brussels to ground its recommendations in political reality.

With military activities that react to the other side's, the perceived testing of each other's limits, the lack of communication lines to clarify concerns or uncertainties, the absence of adequate crisis management procedures and the accumulating tensions between Russia and NATO, many participants in this project believed that the risks of escalation of hazardous incidents or misinterpretation of large-scale exercises in border areas between NATO and Russia are significant and rising. But it is not necessary to believe that the situation is grave and worsening in order to see the value of measures to stabilise the confrontation.

Workshop participants included:

1. **Gen. Yuriy Baluevskiy**, Advisor to the Commander in Chief of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, General of the Army.

2. **Professor Vladimir Baranovsky**, Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Professor Member of the Directorate, Chairman of the Dissertation Council of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) Russian Academy of Sciences, Deputy Director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO).

3. **General Knud Bartels**, Former Chairman of NATO Military Committee.

4. **Dr. Tatiana Bogdasarova**, Program Coordinator at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

5. **Gen. Nikolay Bordyuzha**, Colonel-General, Secretary of the Security

Council of Russia in 1998-99, Head of the Presidential Administration of Russia in 1998-99, Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2003-17, Member of Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

6. **General Evgeny Buzhinskiy**, Vice President of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Chairman of the Executive Board of the PIR Center.

7. **Ambassador Ünal Çeviköz**, Former Deputy Undersecretary at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador to the United Kingdom and Iraq.

8. **Vladislav Chernov**, Former Head of the Russian Delegation on Military Security and Arms Control, OSCE.

9. **Professor Dmitry Danilov**, Head of the Department of European Security at the Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences; Professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University).

10. **Andrey Frolov**, Lead Expert at the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST).

11. **Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper,** Former Director-General of the NATO International Military Staff.

12. **Aleksandr Khramchikhin**, Deputy Director of the Institute for Political and Military Analysis in Moscow.

13. **Gen. Valentin Korabelnikov**, Chief of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU), Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation 1997-2009, General of the Army (rtd.), Member of Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

14. **Andrey Kortunov**, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

15. **Dr. Katarzyna Kubiak**, Policy Fellow at the European Leadership Network (ELN).

16. **Lukasz Kulesa**, Research Director at the European Leadership Network (ELN).

17. **Gen. Anatoly Kulikov**, Former Minister of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, General of the Army (rtd.), President of the Russian Military Commanders Club, Member of Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

18. **Ambassador Douglas Lute**, Former US Permanent Representative to NATO.

19. **Professor Alexander Nikitin**, Director of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Security (CEAS) at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

20. **Professor Dr. Sergey Oznobishchev**, Section Head at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vice-President of the Russian Political Science Association, Director of the Institute for Strategic Assessments, Professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO).

21. **Ruslan Pukhov**, Director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST).

22. **Oberst a.D. Wolfgang Richter**, Senior Associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Former Head of the military section of the Permanent Representation of Germany to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

23. **Gen. Leontiy Shevtsov**, Colonel-General, Former Deputy Minister of the Interior of the Russian Federation, Adviser to the Head of the troops of the National Guard of Russia.

24. **General Sir Rupert Smith**, Former Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

25. **Sir Adam Thomson**, Director of the European Leadership Network (ELN), Former UK Permanent Representative to NATO.

26. **Gen. Viacheslav Trubnikov**, Former Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation, General of the Army (rtd), Member of Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).

27. **Nick Williams**, Former Head of Operations for Afghanistan and Iraq, NATO International Staff; Senior Associate at the European Leadership Network (ELN).

28. **Ambassador Alexander Vershbow**, Distinguished Fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security at the Atlantic Council, Former NATO Deputy Secretary General.

29. **Professor Dr. Katarzyna Zysk**, Head of Research and Deputy Director at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS).

Endnotes

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