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Reducing Nuclear Risks:

European Perspectives from the 2019 PrepCom

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BASIC

The British American Security Information Council (BASIC) is an independent think tank and registered charity based in Whitehall, London, promoting innovative ideas and international dialogue on nuclear disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation. Since 1987, we've been at the forefront of global efforts to build trust and cooperation on some of the world's most progressive global peace and security initiatives, advising governments in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, the Middle East and Russia. Through an approach based on active listening, understanding and empathy, the charity builds bridges across divides and lay new pathways to inclusive security.

BASIC has developed institutional expertise across a number of transatlantic issue areas, including the UK-US nuclear relationship, the UK's Trident programme, the politics of disarmament and arms control in the UK Parliament, NATO nuclear weapons in Europe, the Middle East, the evolving role of responsibility in nuclear governance, and expanding technological threats to SSBN platforms.

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Introduction

This report arises from a roundtable on ‘Developing European Perspectives on Nuclear Risks’ on 7 May 2019, hosted at the Polish Mission to the UN in New York and under the sponsorship of the Dutch Foreign Ministry during the 2019 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee. Held under the Chatham House Rule, the discussion included representatives from European Governments, the European Union, NATO and think tanks, and was facilitated by Paul Ingram (Executive Director, BASIC).

This was a European discussion of nuclear risks in Europe and proposals to mitigate them. There is a shared belief that nuclear risks have recently increased. Nuclear arsenals worldwide are being modernised, and political relations between the United States and Russia have deteriorated to perilously low levels. The INF Treaty is on the brink of collapse, and doubts hang over the extension of the last remaining arms control agreement - New START. Strategic stability is challenged by nuclear doctrines that arguably lower the threshold for nuclear use, and at a minimum raise the salience of nuclear weapons in Europe.

Renewed nuclear tension with Russia affects Europe uniquely and demands a collective approach in bringing the United States and Russia together. Europe has strength in the diversity of perspectives amongst its NATO and EU partners: two Nuclear Weapon States (NWS), a significant number of Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS) that rely on extended deterrence, and non-aligned NNWS. Europe incorporates all shades of opinion across the wider multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation regime, and proposals that garner widespread support in Europe will have an increased likelihood of gaining traction internationally in the context of the NPT Review Cycle.

Risk reduction featured heavily at the 2019 NPT PrepCom. Its draft recommendation calling ‘for the elaboration of measures that can contribute to building confidence and to reduce the risk of the use of nuclear weapons, either intentionally, by miscalculation, or by accident, in the context of achieving nuclear disarmament’ received widespread support.¹ There is significant interest in credible, practical and realistic proposals in this area.

Key Takeaways

- ° The greatest nuclear risk in Europe is inadvertent nuclear use in an escalating crisis due to misperception and miscalculation.
- ° Ambiguity in nuclear signalling can have both stabilising and destabilising effects and there is a need to further examine the role of ambiguity in nuclear doctrine to minimise risk and to build trust and confidence.
- ° Pan-European discussions on risk reduction need to be inclusive of all stakeholders.

Perspectives on Nuclear Risk

Nuclear risk is intimately tied to deterrence postures, their inevitable consequence. Stable deterrence relationships rely on careful calculations and balance of risks. Participants agreed that until nuclear arsenals were dismantled, discussions on risk reduction need to include perspectives driven by the objective of stable deterrence. They would also benefit from establishing a common understanding of nuclear risk and risk reduction.

There are three broad types of nuclear risk: premeditated intentional use; inadvertent use; and accidental. Participants broadly agreed that the most significant nuclear risk was inadvertent use in an escalating conflict caused by misperception and miscalculation within an ambiguous NATO-Russia deterrence relationship. There are mutual misunderstandings and uncertainty over each other's nuclear doctrine, ambiguous signalling and the deployment of destabilising nuclear weapon systems. The prevalence of dual-capable systems and the 'entanglement' of nuclear and conventional command and control could influence decision-making in a crisis given short decision times.

BASIC's report, *Re-emerging Nuclear Risks in Europe*, was published just before the roundtable. It stated that risk reduction proposals should seek to 'reduce ambiguity, exercise restraint and more clearly signal the intent and purpose of nuclear doctrines'.² This is consistent with the concept of Strategic Risk Reduction outlined in the recent Paris G7 Statement on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (March 2019) also supported by the European Union. This affirms the importance of:

'transparency and dialogue on nuclear doctrines, military-to-military dialogues, hotline agreements among nuclear weapon possessors, "accident measure" agreements, transparency, and notification exercises, as well as missile launch notification and other data exchange agreements for reducing the risk of misperception and miscalculation'.³

There was some disagreement expressed at the roundtable over whether the risks of nuclear accident and insecurity deserve more attention. NWS officials believe there is already adequate systems in place to minimise or even eliminate these risks, though they acknowledged that more might need to be done to better communicate these actions and the reason for their confidence.

Risk in Ambiguity

Ambiguity in nuclear signalling is a major cause of nuclear risk in Europe, but is also seen as an essential dimension of stable deterrence postures. This requires a careful balance of threat and assurance. All states engaged in nuclear deterrence combine some level of ambiguity with clarity over other circumstances they would not contemplate use. They believe that too much reassurance to an adversary could embolden them to take action just below the nuclear threshold and engage in 'salami-slicing'. On the other hand, too much ambiguity can be misread, breed mistrust and trigger arms-racing.

Participants recognised that there has been an uptick in the ambiguities surrounding the deterrence relationship between NATO and Russia, particularly a mutual mistrust of the other's nuclear doctrine and intentions. There is speculation that Russia has an 'escalate to de-escalate' doctrine (using nuclear weapons in a 'limited fashion' first to force an adversary into backing down), but this is flatly denied by Moscow. In Russia there is a belief that the United States seeks strategic dominance by undermining the credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrent.

States need to weigh the balance of ambiguity to minimise the risk of misperception and miscalculation, and to credibly convey that they would only ever contemplate nuclear threats in a strategic and defensive posture. Re-emerging fears about intentions for limited nuclear use with non-strategic nuclear weapons, the lowering of the nuclear threshold and preparations for nuclear warfighting could better be assuaged. One participant suggested that dialogue between NATO and Russia on the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction that underpinned stability in the Cold War could decrease tensions.

The roundtable discussion made clear that there is no European consensus on whether Russia actually has an 'escalate to de-escalate' policy. Some participants believed it did, based upon their use of tactical and dual-capable platforms in military exercises, the development of new weapon systems and large stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons. There was agreement that it was prudent to engage in frank dialogue to clarify doctrine and discuss effective signalling. The fora for such discussions could include the P5 Process, the NATO-Russia Council, as well as the OSCE.

There was a recognition that the US Government's explanation of the US 2018 Nuclear Posture Review at the 2018 NPT PrepCom and the 2018 UN First Committee was a positive step and the collective NWS commitment to explain their nuclear postures to a side-event at the 2020 RevCon is a welcome step. This type of engagement in itself can build trust and create a culture of transparency.

The P5 Process

The P5 Process is an obvious place for the NWS to increase transparency and mutual understanding of nuclear doctrines. Recent signs of improvement in discussions have opened up a valuable opportunity for confidential exchange amongst the NWS, especially on sensitive issues such as clarifying differences between capabilities and doctrine. But it was also noted that it is not always clear to NNWS what progress is made because P5 discussions happen behind closed doors. NWS could share more information with NNWS, engage them in discussions when possible and explain when and why transparency is not possible.



Risk in nuclear weapon systems

Certain nuclear weapon systems can pose a higher risk than others, whilst those that do not fit with the official policy can stimulate suspicion, undermine trust and pose risks in deterrence relationships. These may include non-strategic nuclear weapons, dual-capable systems and intermediate-range missiles. Notwithstanding official doctrine, these weapons appear to lower the threshold for nuclear use. Participants noted with particular concern Russia's violation of the INF Treaty, the deployment of 9M729 in the western theatre, the development of new nuclear weapons and Russia's large stockpiles of non-strategic weapons left over from the Cold War. On the Russian side, there is a reciprocal mistrust of new low yield nuclear weapons being added to the US arsenal, the modernisation of forward-deployed nuclear weapons and deployment of ballistic missile defences.

Participants recognised that, while it was important to ask whether certain systems are inherently destabilising, the situation is complex. Indeed, it may be that there are no clear answers, as nuclear weapons only gain meaning within doctrine and states' intentions to use them. For example, on the one hand, developments in hypersonic missiles could be stabilising if they are perceived to restore a sense of 'mutual vulnerability' in a deterrence relationship. On the other hand, they could be destabilising if they are perceived to cut decision-making time to the extent that they stoke fears of a first-use in a crisis.

A number of participants noted the difference between nuclear modernisation for the purpose of maintenance and replacement and nuclear development which adds new systems with new missions, which could more readily be characterised as vertical proliferation. Others noted that investment in modernisation, the upgrading of capabilities intended for defensive capabilities or efforts to fill perceived gaps in deterrent postures often look like an investment in first-strike capabilities from an adversary's perspective. In this respect, assessing nuclear risk and measures to reduce it requires a full accounting for

the perspectives of all stakeholders. In an environment characterised by ambiguity and mistrust, it is natural that states will not take at face value others' declaratory policies if they are underpinned by systems seen to be inherently destabilising. Indeed, for this very reason, some participants suggested it would be prudent for dialogue to focus specifically on the risks posed by certain nuclear weapons systems rather than spend too much time on doctrine, and that this conversation should include NNWS.

Arms Control

Arms control and mutual restraint have traditionally been the most important measure in controlling the risk. Indeed, NATO has viewed arms control as an essential dimension alongside deterrence for creating security for member-states. By nature, it requires dialogue, limits systems that are seen as mutually destabilising and importantly, provides the possibility for verification to provide insight into the adversary's capabilities. Verification presents the opportunity to reinforce and restore faith in arms control, and subsequently to build confidence between actors.

Ways Forward

The following ideas were proposed by roundtable participants, though inclusion here does not imply priority or support from the whole group.

- Russia should be engaged in dialogue over nuclear posture and doctrine within the P5 Process, NATO-Russia Council and the OSCE. Dialogue should include the engagement or notification of NNWS when possible;
- NWS could engage in dialogue over the risks inherent within certain nuclear weapon systems;
- NATO and Russia should improve crisis communication, increase military-to-military contact and emergency hotlines;
- NATO and Russia should increase the frequency and detail of exercise notification;
- NATO should fine-tune deterrence messaging and ensure consistency in messaging to reduce the risk of misperception and miscalculation;
- NATO member states should consider the 'balance of ambiguity' in nuclear doctrine in order to minimise risk;
- NATO should make efforts, including wargames, to better understand escalation pathways;
- Europe should establish a European Risk Reduction Center;
- NWS should negotiate a political statement along the lines of the Reagan Gorbachev statement, 'a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought'.
- States should practice restraint in signalling, rhetoric and deployments in a deteriorating security environment.

Conclusion

It is commonly understood that nuclear risks in Europe are increasing. The modernisation of nuclear arsenals, tensions with Russia, and the slow demise of the existing arms control regime mean that there is increasing consensus that the policy community should focus on new ways to mitigate re-emerging nuclear risks. There is an expectation that discussions on risk reduction will receive greater prominence at the 2020 NPT Review Conference.

Naturally, identifying nuclear risks may be easier than implementing proposals that effectively tackle them, especially when these proposals require engagement with an adversary. Nevertheless, agreement that a prime focus should be on reducing the risk of inadvertent nuclear use through miscalculation and misperception due to ambiguity is helpful. This presents an opportunity for European governments to show leadership. This will require states to reconsider: levels of ambiguity in nuclear postures; what signals certain systems send in ambiguous environments; how to minimise destabilising ambiguity in NATO-Russia relations; and to clarify understandings of Russian doctrine and intentions.

Credible practical and implementable risk reduction proposals could significantly improve the security environment in Europe, and pave the way for further proposals. In terms of decreasing the risk of misperception and miscalculation, risk reduction will go hand in hand with restoring trust and increasing transparency. Moreover, risk reduction can be used as a driver for further progress in disarmament as a way for states to work together, engage in dialogue, rebuild habits of cooperation and reinvigorate the wider non-proliferation regime.

Endnotes

- [1] 'Recommendations to the 2020 Review Conference', NPT/CONF.2020/PC.III/CRP.4/Rev.1, 9 May 2019, <http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom19/documents/CRP4Rev1.pdf>
- [2] Maxwell Downman and Marion Messmer, 'Re-emerging Nuclear Risks in Europe: Mistrust, ambiguity, escalation and arms-racing between NATO and Russia', BASIC, April 2019.
- [3] '2019 G7 Statement on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, G7 France, April 2019, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2019_g7_statement_on_non-proliferation_and_disarmament_cle881416.pdf and http://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom19/statements/29April_EU.pdf

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