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BASIC

Advancing Strategic Risk Reduction in Europe

Perspectives from Paris

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BASIC

The British American Security Information Council (BASIC) is an independent think tank and registered charity based in central 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 'European strategies for strategic risk reduction' on 1 October 2019, hosted at the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique in Paris and under the sponsorship of the Dutch Foreign Ministry. Held under the Chatham House Rule, the discussion included representatives from European governments, the European Union, NATO and think tanks, and was facilitated by Maxwell Downman (Co-Director, BASIC).

This was a European discussion of nuclear risks in Europe and proposals to mitigate them. The G7 Nuclear Proliferation and Disarmament Group plans to improve and spread an understanding of strategic risk reduction measures, especially in the context of the 2020 NPT Review Conference. It is impossible to eliminate risk between technologically advanced states that rely upon strategic balance and deterrence strategies for their security. Nuclear deterrence does not pretend to eliminate that risk; indeed the credibility of nuclear deterrence requires states to signal preparedness to use nuclear weapons. But this effort to reduce strategic risk rests upon the assumption that just as risks can get worse, deterrence relationships can also be improved with particular measures that do not undermine stability or the credibility of postures.

Rising strategic risks today can be attributed to several factors, including but not limited to:

- international tensions between the nuclear-armed states;
- the further erosion of the existing nuclear arms control regime;
- particular dimensions of the modernisation of nuclear arsenals including new and exotic systems ranging from dual-capable delivery systems and lower-yield nuclear weapons that imply a lower threshold of use.

- new forms of autonomous delivery systems with warheads that could disrupt and destabilise the strategic balance, or undermine confidence in it; and
- potential escalation pathways exacerbated by the entanglement of nuclear and conventional systems, particularly command and control.

These risks have particular impact in Europe, where there are multiple security actors and a deep level of distrust between NATO and Russia. Communication between civilian and military leaderships atrophied. Russia's violation of the INF Treaty and the subsequent US decision to withdraw has deepened doubts around the future of nuclear arms control and driven public fears of a renewed arms race.

The interest in nuclear risk reduction has been growing globally. NATO and states in the wider European community would do well to show they are responding to this by drawing other nuclear-armed states into the international discussion on measures to reduce nuclear risks, something that would directly benefit NATO security.

Proposals to reduce strategic risks arising from the Paris roundtable include transparency and dialogue on nuclear doctrines and postures, military-to-military dialogues, hotline agreements among nuclear weapon possessors, "accident measure" agreements, and notification exercises, as well as missile launch notification and other data exchange agreements.

Context and Challenges of Nuclear Risk in Europe

Nuclear Risk Reduction (NRR) addresses risks which can lower the threshold for nuclear weapons use. Although NRR thinking has its origin in the Cold War, the issue was resurrected after the 2015 NPT Review Conference and efforts focused upon strengthening nuclear security, but more recently has expanded to include safety, nuclear deterrence posture and non-proliferation.

Strategic Risk Reduction (SRR) as referred to by the G7 – distinct from NRR – focuses predominantly on strategic risk in Europe, the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation, the INF Treaty and Europe as a community of nation states. Whilst there was disagreement over the interpretation of SRR, participants agreed that the discussion needed to involve a range of groups including the arms control, deterrence and political communities.

Interest in SRR emerges from the recognition that arms control and other forms of risk management are disintegrating as they lose political support. Equally, it was said that we should not be preserving institutions simply for fear of the unknown. This was an opportunity to build an alternative structure that caters to European needs.

SRR initiatives could bring significant benefits to European security and stability. Examples included:

- reducing the risks of misunderstanding and miscalculation
- clarification of nuclear doctrines around nuclear use, conditions for use and scope
- curbing the incentives to modernise arsenals (including dual-capable systems) beyond minimum requirements and
- disincentivizing the temptation to conflate nuclear with conventional capabilities as part of a deterrence war-fighting posture.

There was recognition that SRR is not a “one-size-fits-all” strategy; nuclear weapon states possess different nuclear strategies that inform their individual deterrence requirements and level of risk that they are willing to absorb. In particular, participants drew attention to the limits of transparency in nuclear doctrine; some level of strategic ambiguity is required for stable deterrence. Nuclear possessors are understandably reluctant to draw ‘red lines’ and risk creating a ‘commitment trap.’ On the other hand, ambiguity comes with a hidden cost to strategic relationships and can undermine the overall stability of deterrence and effective disarmament diplomacy. Getting the ambiguity balance right demands a challenging and dynamic assessment of the consequences with imperfect information, and could benefit from extensive consultation on the principles used to determine the appropriate level. No one can be confident that they have achieved this.

A number of participants identified a significant risk that concerned the cyber domain and its interaction with conventional and strategic deterrence. Hybrid warfare represented a particular source of concern that underscores the importance for actors to adapt to changing realities. Distinct from the Cold War, the traditional mechanisms used to reduce risk may not be sufficient in this regard and require a different approach. European states therefore need to become more active in taking part in the discussion on risk arising from disruptive technologies and not limit itself in this regard.

Some participants questioned the extent to which the strategic context has truly changed and the risks affected. An accepted point of departure from the Cold War concerned the flow and speed of information that could adversely affect and disrupt nuclear weapon decision-making in a crisis. Misunderstandings and the potential for crisis escalation (deliberate or unintended) emerged as a central theme during the meeting. Whilst participants were receptive to the belief that this may occur, specifically over the issue of nuclear doctrines and foreign policy posturing, the idea was also advanced that it is often 'overused' by policy-framers as a political ploy to cement positions, extract concessions and steer political favour. In this context, the group questioned if states were really misunderstanding each other, rather than just not listening or deliberately manipulating perspectives to outmanoeuvre adversaries. Russia's alleged violation of the INF Treaty and US nuclear modernisation was noted as a salient example of both a breakdown in communication and a calculated assessment of national interests.

So what can Europeans do?

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

- European states have leverage with the US through NATO and should utilise this to drive discussion and encourage new actors to be brought into the dialogue.
- Europeans could lobby their allies in NATO to further develop arms control and plan for a brighter future for it.
- They could prepare technical groundwork as a foundation for action when the political will allows.
- They could lead by example on transparency and arms control.

There was also agreement that European states should not constrain themselves by 'thinking in a box.' Some saw a tendency to overstate the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation between Russia and Europe. Others expressed the view that Russia was instrumentalising risk as a tool to ferment division between US and Europe, in the belief that European fears work in their favour. There was some disagreement over whether this was because Russians feel that this is the best strategic choice available in a very challenging strategic environment, or that it was down to a particular tendency within the Russian psyche. Is it true that Russia is caught in a trap? The answer to this question has major implications as to the appropriate strategy for managing the relationship.

European states should not constrain themselves by 'thinking in a box.'

Approaches to Nuclear Risk Reduction

The G7 statement on Strategic Risk Reduction (SRR), seeks to:

generate communication and deeper mutual understanding of the strategic concerns of all actors and the dynamics between them in a manner that reduces distrust, misunderstanding and the risk of miscalculation, and manages the risk between them.[1]

SRR therefore specifically focuses on managing the strategic relationships between states. It differs from strategic threat reduction, which concerns the size of nuclear arsenals or other military capabilities (disarmament). If it succeeds in increasing trust and reducing risks of misinterpretation or surprise attack, SRR could contribute to creating the conditions for future disarmament but does not itself involve disarmament. In the understanding of many participants, SRR also differs from measures aimed at tackling risks to security and safety of nuclear systems and their command and control, which are crucial responsibilities for individual nuclear-armed states, and not conducive to international discussion. Nuclear Weapon States could do more to explain to the international community why they have confidence in the safety and security of their nuclear weapon systems, without compromising their systems. This might include explanations of regulatory practices, responsibility and accountability structures.

Participants recognised that there are particular and critical dangers associated with the potential for rapid escalation of hybrid conventional-nuclear crises, perhaps driven by a desire to show solid resolve or by command systems focused on delivering maximum capabilities and multiple options including nuclear use in times of crisis. Participants discussed a number of ways of improving the situation through restraint and doctrine. To reduce escalatory risks, states need to ensure that they act in ways that increase predictability and restraint in crisis conditions

Despite major differences over nuclear postures, there was agreement on the benefits of sustained dialogue on doctrine, though it would appear that this needs to occur in a number of arenas, including the P5, CEND, NATO and other regional contexts. The OSCE could be a useful forum in theory, but needs to improve its relevance.

Participants discussed a 'gift-basket' approach to SRR. This was controversial. On the one hand, such an approach recognises that nuclear weapon states have very different ideas, nuclear cultures, strategic situations and approaches to posture, such that unilateral offers might facilitate progress. It was said that we have to be realistic in our expectations around what can be achieved in May 2020. The NPT may not be the forum to make tangible progress on risk reduction as opposed to reporting on it, and that measures are more likely to come as unilateral steps.

On the other, this undermines the possibility of more formal, negotiated approaches that can lead to mutual bargaining and agreement.

Risk Reduction, Ambiguity and Nuclear Signalling

It is often said that deterrence is naturally fragile, relying upon credible threats, and there are major issues around the logic and resolve to execute nuclear release in crisis or if deterrence fails. This fragility is even more acute in situations of strategic assurance. In such situations, the coherence of signalling is crucial and this is an issue for Europeans and the US in NATO.

There are particular challenges around credible signalling in nuclear postures and declaratory policy. No First Use positions, for example, are frequently criticised for being unverifiable, and many challenge them on the basis that if decision-makers were considering terrifying choices between future existence and the launch of nuclear weapons, a previous declaration made in peacetime would hardly play the critical role. Nevertheless, nuclear armed states still have declaratory postures and engage seriously in attempts to signal; indeed, signalling forms the very basis of nuclear deterrence. They could often do a better job in explaining their existing postures and the limits to those postures. It was agreed, for example, that nuclear weapons should not be used for coercion. It is also clear that the credibility of particular proposals such as NFU cannot be judged in black-and-white terms.

The question was discussed over whether there are any credible strategic scenarios in which France would contemplate first use of nuclear weapons as relevant, and many participants expressed their belief there could indeed be such scenarios. But it remains a challenge to see these scenarios as the reason why France retains its nuclear weapons. There may therefore be credible scope for sole purpose declarations instead of NFU. Sole-purpose (rather than sole-use) refers to the design and intent of the nuclear deterrent being to exclusively deter nuclear threats. It does not necessarily prohibit the use of nuclear weapons in other scenarios but expresses that these are not the intention behind deployment, and that therefore there would have to be, on balance, a presupposition that nuclear weapons would not be relevant.

It was stated that sole purpose is not applicable in the French case because the nuclear deterrent is claimed to be relevant to any strategic threat to French vital interests. This intent to maximise flexibility can often be harmful to diplomatic initiatives within the NPT context. It can also undermine credibility. The debate over whether the proposition contained in the latest US Nuclear Posture Review to threaten nuclear retaliation against a cyber attack is credible is a case in point.

Ambiguity in posture, and particularly in signalling when the leadership would consider the use of nuclear weapons, can result in achieving desirable deterrence outcomes in areas that were not the primary intention, as well as avoiding deeply undesirable outcomes in which an opponent might operate with impunity up to a red-line, or call any bluff and operate over it. On the other hand, it can lead to miscalculation, and leave open interpretations of weakness. It can drive arms racing and worst-case assumption planning, can lead to pre-emption in crises, and can harm wider diplomacy objectives in arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

It was claimed that the ambiguity challenge with dual-use platforms is different in times of peace and crisis. For example, it was claimed the French aircraft carrier, Charles DeGaulle, has frequently been deployed without states fearing possible a nuclear mission, even though it carries nuclear weapons. The signalling is clear, and there has been no media or official reaction to suggest otherwise.

European Leadership on Strategic Risk Reduction

The discussion on risk reduction and crisis stability centred upon a number of areas:

- the need for mutual understanding and information exchange on doctrine;
- communication, including mil-mil contact, hotlines, intelligence sharing;
- an effort to bring greater predictability in the strategic relationship;
- addressing the issue of disruptive technology and how to minimise the dangers to strategic and crisis stability emerging from it, recognising that it could also bring benefits.

It was said that we would greatly benefit from robust peacetime communication channels that could also be used during a crisis. There is a balance to be achieved here between maximising benefits from improved understandings that come from regular communication with the need to ensure that unambiguous crisis communication is treated extremely seriously.

There was agreement on the benefits from expanding the number and scope of risk reduction centres, to incorporate all Nuclear Weapon States, incorporating technology that can be used to improve crisis stability.

There are major challenges in achieving a common agenda for action arising from differing conceptions of strategic stability, in scope, region and posture. Nevertheless, there ought to be at minimum a shared understanding that effective and stable deterrence requires all sides to achieve some high level of confidence in their second strike capabilities, and that efforts to undermine such capabilities, particularly in the pursuit of strategic dominance, are deeply mistaken and dangerous. In this context it is important to treat concerns over BMD seriously, in particular the longer term challenges that arise from technologies that could neutralise second strike capabilities or command and control and strengthen the strategic advantages of going first. There are serious questions for the medium to long term of how we can tackle the incentives for developing disruptive technologies that could further drive arms racing. In particular, some effort is needed to establish a code of conduct governing destabilising offensive cyber capabilities, and discuss how better to establish attribution for offensive cyber attacks.

One area discussed was in the opportunities available for states to extend the information given not only over their posture and the reasoning behind it, but also over the nature and extent of their nuclear deployments and their consistency with the posture and said reasoning. Those systems whose deployment have particularly destabilising effects should be avoided, and there needs to be an ongoing official dialogue at high level involving Nuclear Weapon States that communicate clearly any concerns over such deployments in a respectful manner, recognising that perceptions may be just as crucial as objective analysis. It was recognition of this in particular that led to the 1987 INF Treaty, and in the current environment a renewed dialogue in this area could be restarted.

It was objected that Russia appears to have established a pattern of operationalising nuclear fears within NATO for their strategic benefit. Any such dialogue could simply end up handing them further information on how better to achieve these outcomes. Indeed, one contributor boldly stated that NATO would appear to have two extreme strategies open to it. It could build up its military, become politically tough on Russia and simply accept more nuclear risk in the hope that this would bring Russia around to a more reasonable

position, or it could attempt to rebuild trust with Russia, essentially by reducing its threat, but risk simply handing Russia further room to reestablish a dominant position in Europe. The crucial question here may lie in how best to manage the relationship with Russia in a manner that can best reassure them and Europeans without creating perverse incentives.

Conclusion

It was agreed that there was scope for further consideration of SRR ideas. They all have problems and challenges, which need to feature in the discussion and be fully understood. Some may not appear realistic. The relationship with Russia and conceptions of what is possible within that dialogue had a huge impact upon perceptions. But the SRR agenda, the attempt to find common ground, and the willingness to understand others' perspectives in this process, are crucial elements in finding progress in addressing the existential nuclear risks. This can establish common ground with other states, whether strategic rivals or anti-nuclear states and critics who are usually allergic to giving any credence to nuclear deterrence at all. This could be a worthwhile contribution to wider efforts to avoid an acrimonious crash at the 2020 NPT Review Conference, which could result in lasting damage to Treaty.

Endnotes

[1] 2019 G7 Statement on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, 6 April 2019, p. 6 - 7, last accessed 25 January 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/admin/uploaddefault/0001/05/2ffa826926cd72354b90a05f7de765bfcc9908b6.pdf>

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