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BASIC

Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction

Perspectives from the North-Eastern Flank

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BASIC

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Summary

Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North-Eastern Flank addresses the current threat assessments and perceptions of nuclear and conventional escalation risks in Eastern Europe and Russia.

The report is part of the two-year project 'Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction' that BASIC is undertaking in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The report finds that the historic experiences NATO's north-eastern flank countries have had with Russia and the West continues to inform current threat and risk assessments as does the near proximity to Russia and Russian allies. This arguably manifests itself in a tension between risk and heightened fear which ultimately may feed into an insecurity spiral.

With the current situation in Europe the risk of escalation of conflict between Russia and NATO is real. It is paramount that diplomacy and the risk reduction agenda between NATO and Russia is revitalised. The report has unearthed at least two perspectives that are important to the revitalisation of this risk reduction agenda. First, risk reduction between NATO and Russia is also about disentangling risk from fear – on both sides. Second, understanding and conclusions about Russian intentionality cannot rest on overstretched concepts and assumptions.

This report was written prior to the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The report is based on the deliberations with government officials and experts from NATO's north-eastern flank countries at a one-day workshop on NATO-Russia risk assessments in September 2021. The outbreak of the war may have changed or reinforced certain risk and threat assessments.

Introduction

This report is the first in a series of three reports that address the current threat assessments and perceptions of nuclear and conventional escalation risks in Eastern Europe and Russia.

The report is part of the two-year project 'Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction' that BASIC is undertaking in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹

Phase two complements and builds upon the lessons of phase one (2019-2020) that explored risk and threat assessments of primarily Western European NATO member-states in relation to potential nuclear and conventional conflict escalation in Europe. The main finding in phase one was that the political tensions between Russia and NATO members were at the core of the current and near-future nuclear risks in Europe. These tensions may lead to misunderstanding and distrust and thereby increase the risk for misperception and miscalculation in the strategic realm.²

Phase two continues this work of mapping and exploring risk assessments and risk reduction steps in two strands of track 1.5 dialogues with experts and officials from NATO's north-eastern flank countries and Russia. Phase two will conclude with a Strategic Dialogue in the Autumn 2022 that brings together the participants from both phases to foster mutual understanding and lay the groundwork to implement risk reduction proposals that are identified through the workshops.

This report specifically looks at the current threat and risk assessments in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, also referred to as NATO's north-eastern flank countries. The report is based on the deliberations of a full day workshop held in September 2021 with the participation of experts and government officials from all four countries. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule.

The report advances in three parts. The first part gives a brief overview of NATO-Russia relations since the 1990s. The second part presents the main findings from the workshop, and the third part gives a brief commentary to these findings.

¹ Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Announcing Phase 2 of the BASIC-Netherlands Collaboration. <https://basicint.org/applying-a-systematic-approach-to-nato-russia-risk-reduction-announcing-phase-2-of-the-basic-netherlands-collaboration/>

² Marion Messmer, 'Strategic Risk Reduction in the European Context', BASIC report (BASIC, 30 June 2020), <https://basicint.org/report-strategic-risk-reduction-in-the-european-context/>

NATO-Russia Relations

Following the end of the Cold War, NATO went through a period of readjustment and reassertion to adapt to the new post-Cold War international environment.

The need to revitalise the alliance after the fall of the Soviet Union was underscored immediately after the end of the Cold War with NATO's 'Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance' adopted in July 1990 that expanded the alliance's *raison d'être* to encompass environmental, social and economic issues.³ This was followed by a number of deliberations during the 1990s, including the heavily debated 'getting out of treaty area or out of business' that eventually led to NATO engagement outside treaty area.⁴

The attempts to revitalise NATO in the new era had a profound impact in Moscow. The reassertion of NATO also involved reframing NATO's relationship with Russia. As NATO members maintained that the alliance remained essential and relevant in the post-Cold War era, the new Russian Federation was arguably put on the backfoot. Although NATO extended the so-called 'hand of friendship' to the former Warsaw Pact countries in 1990, NATO remained a bloc, ultimately making future relations between the bloc and other states somewhat asymmetrical. The establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 and the 1994 Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP) formalised this asymmetry.⁵

Russia joined the PfP in 1994, as well as agreed to the 'Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security' between NATO and the Russian Federation in 1997, but continued to advocate for a different security architecture in Europe.⁶ Thus, while the 1997 Act did not prohibit the expansion of NATO and declared the end of the adversarial relationship, Russia argued for an expanded role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to allow Russia to be an equal partner in the European security architecture alongside the rest of Europe. Russia also maintained that the continued presence of NATO in Europe polarised relations between the European states.⁷

3 North Atlantic Council: Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance, July 1990. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23693.htm last accessed 27 October 2021.

4 Military: NATO After the Cold War: It's 'Out of Area or Out of Business', Los Angeles Times, 13 August, 1993; Senator Richard G. Lugar: NATO: Out of Area or Out of Business; A Call for US Leadership to Revive and Redefine the Alliance, "Remarks Delivered to the Open Forum of the US State Department", 2 August 1993;

5 NATO. Partnership for Peace programme. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm last accessed 29 October 2021.

6 With the Act, the both parties agreed amongst other things, to closer cooperation and not consider each other as adversaries, and established the NATO - Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) to hold regular consultations and develop joint initiatives, essentially opening for future joint actions under the authority of UN Security Council or the OSCE. The Act also established a mechanism for closer military-to-military liaison when creating military missions on both sides. The Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation of 1997. https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/media/59451/1997_nato_russia_founding_act.pdf last accessed 26 October 2021.

7 Luca Ratti, 'Back to the Future?: International Relations Theory and NATO-Russia Relations since the End of the Cold War', *International Journal* 64, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 399–422; Luca Ratti, "Resetting" NATO–Russia Relations: A Realist Appraisal Two Decades after the USSR', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 26, no. 2 (April 2013): 141–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2013.779845>; Sergey Radchenko, "Nothing but Humiliation for Russia": Moscow and NATO's Eastern Enlargement, 1993–1995', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6–7 (9 November 2020): 769–815, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1820331>.

NATO Accessions

Crucially, the Act of 1997 did not prevent the accession of new states to NATO. Indeed, three months after the Act was signed, NATO began accession talks with Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic and they all entered into the alliance in 1999. The month after their succession, NATO launched the Membership Action Plan (MAP) paving the way for the eventual accession of the three Baltic states as well as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004. This rapid expansion was followed by the 2008 Bucharest Summit agreement that stipulated that Georgia and Ukraine could become NATO members eventually.

North-Eastern Flank Accessions

Poland immediately after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact embarked upon a two pronged national security strategy to embed Poland and its defence in the collective West via memberships of NATO (1999) and EU (2004). NATO membership was of prime importance perhaps more so than in other Central European countries as Poland's unique experience of partition arguably underscores an existential concern with territorial integrity and a sense of geostrategic vulnerability. At the same time, Warsaw assessed that the defence of Poland could not be undertaken by national means only, which led to ongoing investment in Polish national defence capabilities that has put Poland among the few NATO members spending more than 2% of its GDP on defence.⁸ Warsaw like other European allies recognises the centrality of the United States for credible deterrence and defence. In Poland this translates into a near unconditional support of Washington's policies as well as continued calls for an ever stronger US presence in Europe including invitations to place launchers for NATO's missile shield on Polish ground.⁹

In much the same manner as Poland, the three Baltic countries immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union were preoccupied with a sense of territorial vulnerability and uncertainty surrounding the new Russian Federation's intentions vis-à-vis the region. The geostrategic position, newly reclaimed statehood and the complete lack of domestic defence capabilities installed a certain preoccupation with territorial defence in all three Baltic capitals. Thus, all three embarked upon a process of modernising and rebuilding domestic defence. Territorial defence came to feature prominently in the subsequent defence policies that would enrol everything, including active citizens defence in the territorial defence of the nation. Later as they were approaching NATO membership in 2004, the so-called defensibility of the region was an important aspect in the membership negotiations underscoring how geostrategic considerations were not only a concern to the Baltic countries, but equally so to their future allies.¹⁰

8 Wojciech Lorenz, 'Russia's Strategy, Goals, Means and Ways – A View from Poland', 1 November 2021, <https://basicint.org/russias-strategy-goals-means-and-ways-a-view-from-poland/>; Andrew A. Michta, *Poland*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198790501.003.0007>.

9 Michta, *Poland*; Lorenz, 'Russia's Strategy, Goals, Means and Ways – A View from Poland'.

10 Masha Hedberg and Andres Kasekamp, *Baltic States*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198790501.003.0012>; Egle E. Murauskaite, 'Lithuania: Nuclear and Conventional Risk Assessments, and Policy Responses', *BASIC* (blog), 28 October 2021, <https://basicint.org/lithuania-nuclear-and-conventional-risk-assessments-and-policy-responses/>; Andres Kasekamp and Viljar Veebel, 'The Baltic States and ESDP', in *The North and ESDP: The Baltic States, Denmark, Finland and Sweden*, European Foreign and Security Policy 7 (Gütersloh, 2007), They also all embarked upon integrating their security wider by memberships of the UN (1991), OSCE (1991) and the Council of Europe (1993) as well as the European Union (2004).

Russian Perceptions of NATO Expansion

Thus, the immediate decade following the end of the Cold War did not deliver a final nor uncontested settlement of Europe. The asymmetrical relationship between Russia and NATO remained a source of dispute and more importantly the NATO expansion and potential expansion into the CIS region was not unambiguously condoned by Russia.

Indeed, recent scholarship has highlighted that beginning with the Boris Yeltsin administration (1991-1999) two narratives dominated Russian thinking on NATO expansion. On the one hand, NATO expansion to include the former Warsaw Pact members was acceptable provided it included Russian admission as well, which in turn would ensure Russia's position in NATO as a key ally and partner to the United States. On the other, and quite the opposite, Moscow opposed NATO expansion under the banner of defending Russian interests from NATO encroachment – an encroachment that inevitably would lead to increased Russian insecurity. This opposition gradually strengthened as the possibility of Russian NATO membership faded.¹¹ Both positions or narratives rested on concerns around international acceptance of Russia's legitimate position as a European great power and recognition of Russia's importance for the settlement of Europe after the Cold War.

NATO's intervention in Kosovo that took place without a UN Security Council mandate underscored in Moscow how the West easily disregarded Russia's position as a European great power. This led to on the one hand, Russia suspending the Founding Act and its participation in the Partnership for Peace Programme, and on the other, Russia nudging the Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to accept an international intervention to solve the Kosovo crisis on the premise that Russian troops would be part of it.

2000's

Despite the somewhat shaky start to NATO-Russia relations in the 1990s, a second cooperative wave hit the relationship following the terrorist attacks in the United States and in Russia in the early 2000s that brought a new sense of shared concern about national security and common interest in combatting Islamic terrorism to the relationship. For instance, President Putin was the first international head of state to call President Bush after the 9/11 attacks. Russia and NATO revived talks about Russian accession into NATO and Russia's formal association with the alliance became a reality at the Rome Summit in 2002.¹² At the summit, Russia and NATO issued the document 'NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality' that underscored the new qualitative relationship, and established the NATO-Russia Council (NRC).

The new millennium thus started on a relatively positive note. Indeed, a year after the creation of the NRC, a hotline between the NATO Secretary General and the Russian Minister of Defence was established as a 'further demonstration of an ever-deepening NATO-Russia relationship'.¹³ At the same time, NATO began its second round of accession negotiations with former Warsaw Pact countries, and adopted the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan in November 2002, and the NRC invited the prospective NATO members from Eastern and Central Europe, including the Baltic states to some meetings in the NRC.¹⁴

¹¹ Radchenko, "Nothing but Humiliation for Russia".

¹² NATO, NATO - Russia Council. Rome Summit 2002. <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2002/0205-rome/rome-eng.pdf> last accessed 28 October 2021.

¹³ Statement: Meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at the level of Ministers of Defence NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 1 December 2003. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_20277.htm?selectedLocale=en last accessed 28 October 2021.

¹⁴ Chairman's Statement. 2 April 2004. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_21032.htm?selectedLocale=en last accessed 28 October 2021.



When looking at the developments in the 1990s and 2000s; the substantial expansion of NATO and the attempts to establish a relationship between NATO and the Russian Federation, it becomes clear that NATO also began the new era with new internal dichotomy.

Despite the establishment of the NRC and the intention of inserting a 'new quality' into their relations, some issues including the highly topical one of missiles and missile defence were left outside the deliberations in the NRC, and NATO members continued to arrive at joint decisions before turning to Russia. As a result, deliberations between NATO members and Russia resembled asymmetrical bilateral negotiations, and not as intended, deliberations between equal partners. Missiles and not least missile defence quickly became the most crucial and politically sensitive issue between Russia and NATO, and relations soured further as the United States withdrew from the Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002. The United States also created a new Missile Defence Agency and put missile interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic answering the calls from Poland of an increased US presence in the region. These events arguably 'magnified' Russia's strategic vulnerability and undoubtedly fed the narrative of NATO encroachment, but it also underscored how impotent the NRC in fact was, and how NATO and Russia had utterly failed to institutionally bind together.¹⁵

A Change in Russian Foreign Policy

The events of the 2000s led Russia to adopt a strategy to counter NATO, and further NATO expansion into former Soviet republics. First, Russia in 2007 declared that the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty no longer served Russian interests in response to US plans for missile defence in Eastern Europe. This was followed by Russian suspension of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) also in 2007 after an ongoing debate in the OSCE on a new treaty that would cover the new NATO members. Indeed, the somewhat delayed Russian troop withdrawals from the former republics of Georgia and Moldova were a matter of concern to NATO that made the withdrawal of the troops a condition for NATO members' ratification of the adapted CFE that Russia had tabled in 1999. The US plans for missile defence was seen in Moscow as an attempt to cripple Russian nuclear second strike capabilities, and in 2008 President Medvedev (2008-2012) threatened to station nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad.¹⁶

Against this background of increased tension that followed the US decisions and plans to deploy a missile defence system in Poland, the 2008 Russian-Georgian War naturally sparked a NATO response. Thus, when Georgia claimed control of South-Ossetia in 2008, NATO's response to the Russian invasion was to establish a NATO-Georgia Commission that on the one hand was to support Georgia in its effort to become a full member of NATO, and on the other, to better coordinate NATO's efforts to help Georgia recover from the war.¹⁷

15 Andrej Krickovic, 'When Ties Do Not Bind: The Failure of Institutional Binding in NATO Russia Relations', *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 2 (3 May 2016): 175–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1198077>; Ratti, "Resetting" NATO–Russia Relations'.

16 Ratti, "Resetting" NATO–Russia Relations'. For more on the Suwalki Gap see: Viljar Veebel and Zdzislaw Sliwa, 'The Suwalki Gap, Kaliningrad and Russia's Baltic Ambitions', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (21 August 2019): 111–21, <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.21>.

17 The NATO-Georgia Commission https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52131.htm last accessed 1 November 2021.

The north-eastern flank countries were in particular uneasy, and a delegation comprised of officials from the four countries visited Georgia in an act of solidarity. NATO also suspended the NRC, and the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) signed the agreement with Poland on missile defence.

The Barack Obama administration (2009-2016) inherited a tense relationship between NATO and Russia. Obama attempted a so-called 'reset' of the NATO-Russia relationship that did deliver some progress towards normalising the relationship. For one, the NRC was resumed, President Medvedev participated in the NATO summit in Lisbon in 2010 and NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept 'Active Engagement, Modern Defence' featured a section on NATO-Russia partnership, and NATO declared they would actively seek cooperation with Russia on missile defence.¹⁸

When looking at the developments in the 1990s and 2000s; the substantial expansion of NATO and the attempts to establish a relationship between NATO and the Russian Federation, it becomes clear that NATO also began the new era with new internal dichotomy. Indeed, as NATO was moving 'out of treaty area' and attempting to build a cooperative relationship with Russia in the 1990s and 2000s, NATO's north-eastern flank countries moved towards territorial defence and featured the new Russian Federation as the prime adversary. Arguably, this dichotomy between NATO's western and eastern flank remains decisive for the relations between the NATO allies.

2010's

NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept reconfirmed the three essential core tasks of collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security. Despite the Russian-Georgian war, NATO repeated the pledge to cooperate with Russia on missile defence and declared that the Euro-Atlantic area was in a historic peace because of the 'robust defence, Euro-Atlantic integration and active partnership'.¹⁹

The Concept recognised the strategic value of NATO-Russia cooperation based upon the 1997 Founding Act and the 2002 Rome Declaration. NATO also declared its determination to enhance consultations and practical cooperation and use the full potential of the NRC. The 2010 Concept also called upon Russia to increase transparency on its nuclear weapons in Europe and relocate them away from NATO members territory, and requested that 'further steps must take into account the disparity with the greater Russian stockpiles of short-range nuclear weapons'.²⁰

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 upended the sense of 'historic peace in the Euro-Atlantic' area that the 2010 Concept spoke about. At the Wales Summit in August 2014 NATO underscored the commitment to collective defence, indivisible security and, crucially for the north-eastern flank countries, a commitment to territorial defence. This agenda was driven by the Baltic countries and Poland in particular, and the so-called Readiness Action Plan provided Assurance and Adaptation measures including the establishment of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force to respond to challenges in NATO's periphery. In-place force enablers in NATO's eastern flank countries demonstrated the resolve to defend NATO territory with command and control presence.²¹

¹⁸ NATO: Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, November 2010.

¹⁹ NATO: Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, November 2010.

²⁰ NATO: Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010, November 2010.

²¹ Wales Summit Declaration 5 September 2014; Wales Declaration on the Transatlantic Bond, 5 September 2014; NATO: NATO's Readiness Action Plan, October 2015; Michta, *Poland*.

Despite the strong condemnation of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and suspension of all practical civilian and military cooperation with Russia, as well as adoption of several sanctions against Russia, NATO in theory remained in support of a partnership with Russia and the cooperative approach to Russia as laid out in the 2010 Strategic Concept.²²

The move towards increased territorial defence took another significant step forward not least because of strong Polish and Baltic pressure at the 2016 Warsaw Summit that yet again confirmed NATO's commitment to collective defence, the principle of indivisibility of security and cooperative security. With a renewed emphasis on territorial collective defence, NATO launched among other initiatives the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence posture and 'unambiguously demonstrate... Allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate allied response to any aggression'.²³ Poland and the Baltic countries thus, to a large extent succeeded in their endeavour to move NATO towards more territorial defence and increase the US physical presence in the region.²⁴

Unlike at the Wales Summit, the "partnership" with Russia now became conditional. Citing the 1997 Founding Act and the 2002 Rome declaration, NATO declared Russia had broken the trust 'at the core' between them and had challenged the fundamental principles of the European security architecture. The alliance also stated that the decisions taken by NATO at the summit were not in contradiction of the 1997 Founding Act. Whilst remaining open to a 'periodic' dialogue in the NRC, NATO maintained the decision taken in Wales to suspend practical cooperation with Russia. The Alliance underscored that although partnership with Russia would be of strategic value, now was the time for Russia to be 'constructive' for a partnership to happen.²⁵

22 Wales Summit Declaration 5 September 2014.

23 Para 40, Warsaw Summit Communiqué,

24 Hedberg and Kasekamp, Baltic States; Michta, *Poland*.

25 Warsaw Summit Communiqué

Workshop: Polish and Baltic Risk Assessments

The NATO-Russia relationship in the post-Crimea era naturally informs the current threat and risk assessment in NATO. Yet, it became clear during the workshop dialogue that the period following the end of the Cold War remains integral in NATO's north-eastern flank countries' perceptions of the relationship with Russia

The workshop took place over a full day in September 2021 with participants from the four north-eastern flank countries. The workshop was guided by a set of questions provided by BASIC and the 4 sessions featured presentations from experts and government officials.

Russia

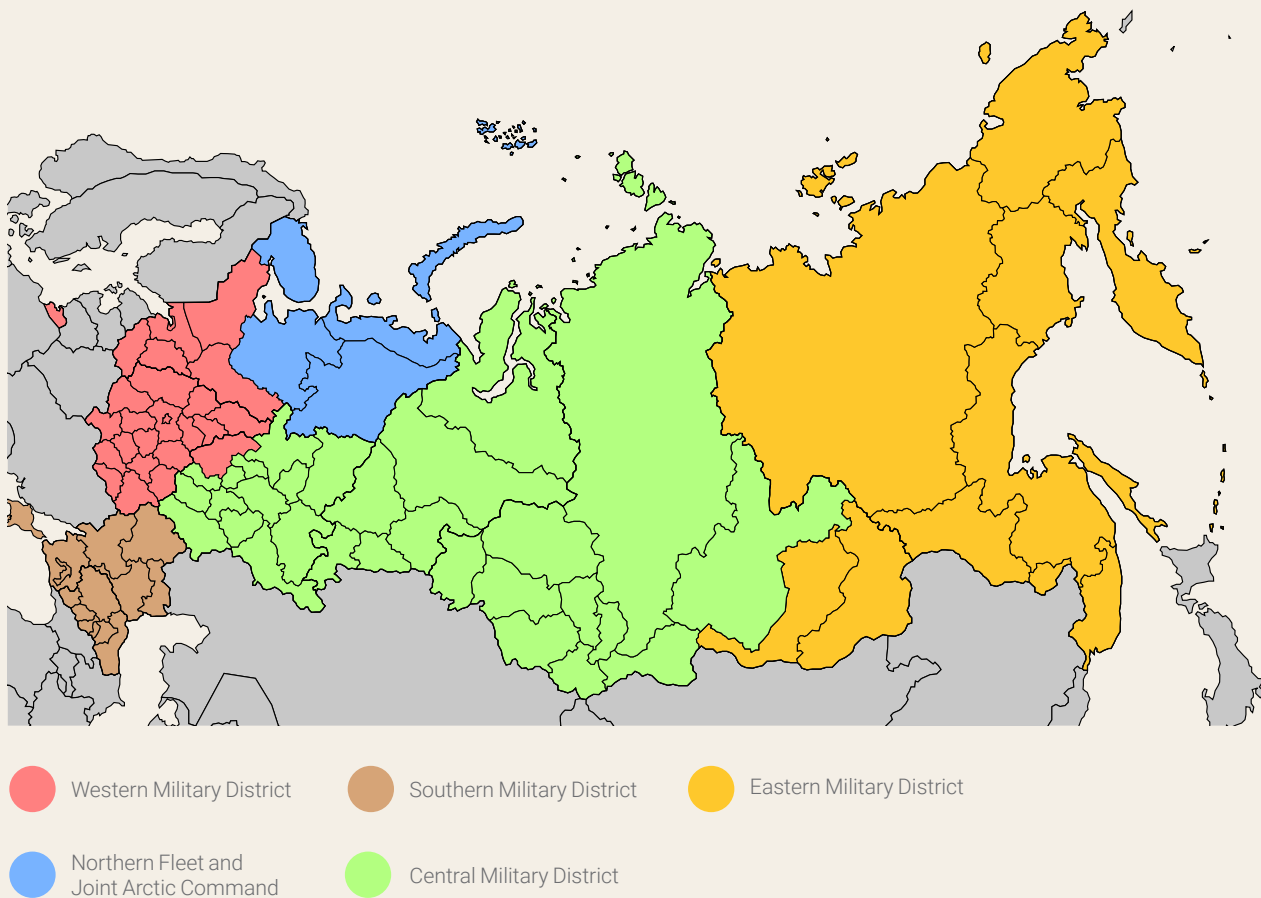
Russia is currently considered to be the most significant threat to the national security of the countries of NATO north-eastern flank. The participants noted that Zapad military exercises since 2009 have all revolved around the invasion of fictive countries geographically located on NATO's north-eastern flank, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has firmly fixed what could be seen as a fear of a somewhat unspecified Russian revisionism in these countries. The significant Russian build-up of military capabilities including dual use weapons systems, adds to a heightened sense of threat. In the eyes of Poland and the Baltic countries a sense of hyper criticality appears to set the north-eastern flank countries apart from NATO's western states, even though the same threat perceptions are shared by the western member states themselves.²⁶

In all four countries, Russia is perceived in general terms to have the intentionality to reassert itself in certain former Soviet republics. This also includes the possible use of force if necessary. However, understanding Russia's integrated approach, as manifested in for example its nuclear doctrine, hybrid campaigns and its military exercises is making threat and risk assessment complex in the region.²⁷ The participants noted that there seems to be a paradox as there is agreement that Russia will not launch an attack on any NATO member state, yet there appears to be a fear of Russia and uncertainties surrounding Russia's intentions vis-à-vis NATO. This uncertainty is primarily based on historic precedents that in turn makes assessments of

²⁶ Since the workshop this may have changed slightly. Indeed, western NATO members are increasingly concerned about the Russian troop movements in the Western Military district.

²⁷ Russia's declaratory policy states that the Kremlin 'reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction' against Russia or its allies, 'as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy' And in the National Security Strategy, Moscow lists that military threats is increased by among other things, the build-up of NATO infrastructure near Russia's borders, NATO's intelligence activities in the area as well as the planned deployments of US intermediate and shorter-range missiles in Europe see: The President of the Russian Federation, Executive Order: Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear deterrence, 8 June 2020; The National Security Strategy also puts forward that Russia will respond by both symmetrical and asymmetrical measures in the event states commit hostile actions that pose a threat to Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity see: The President of the Russian Federation, Order No 400: On the National Strategy of the Russian Federation, July 2 2021.

Figure 1: Russia's Military Districts.



Source: AlexWelens, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Military_districts_of_Russia_2016.svg#/media/File:Military_districts_of_Russia_2016.svg.

the current situation less pragmatic. These uncertainties are also fuelled by Kremlin's use of the historic discourse.

During the workshop it became clear that Russian post-Crimea presence in the Western and Southern Military districts and ongoing "Snap" and Zapad exercises, form the core and basis of Baltic and Polish risk assessment, underscoring that geopolitics continues to inform threat perceptions in the north-eastern flank countries. The potential for conflict and escalation is however largely understood in terms of Russia's relatively high risk tolerance, along with the perception that Russia is manipulating or instrumentalizing risk.

Risk Manipulation

Russian activities including hybrid activities in the Western and Southern Military districts and the entanglement of nuclear and conventional capabilities, are generally viewed by the participants as an intent to manipulate NATO's risk assessments and deterrence to enhance Russia's deterrence posture and perhaps more importantly ensure Russian escalation dominance.

This assessment is further reinforced by the way Russia reports troop presence and movements in the Western and Southern Military Districts under the Vienna Document. This is largely seen as a deliberate attempt to be less transparent around Russian military presence in NATO's periphery. Risk manipulation also explains in the eyes of the north-eastern flank countries the differing interpretation between NATO and Russia of the reporting requirements under the Vienna Document and the ongoing and prolonged debacle on the modernisation of the Document.

During the workshop it was argued by the participants that most if not all Russian activities were viewed against this notion of Russian risk manipulation. This includes grey zone activities such as the ongoing testing of NATO airspace in the Baltic Sea region and the maritime equivalent in the Baltic Sea, alleged Russian cyber activities and manipulation of migrant flows from Belarus.²⁸ In addition the three Baltic states connect the Russian behaviour surrounding energy supplies including nuclear energy to the broader foreign and security policy interests of the Baltic countries.²⁹ For instance, the workshop dialogue highlighted that Lithuania in particular sees the Belarusian Astravyets nuclear power plant close to the Lithuanian border as part of Russian hybrid activities. The power plant is built and owned by Rosatom and is seen as part of a Russian strategy to increase its geopolitical influence on Belarus. Russia is seen to combine foreign policy and technology which in turn can become a tool for Moscow to project soft power and even used to coerce states.³⁰ The alleged Russian hybrid activities in NATO's periphery has also increased the sense among the north-eastern flank countries of them being front line states.³¹

Participants also alluded to a deeper concern that the western strategic community have lost or are losing the ability to understand Russia. The lack of ability to understand what deters Russia is one thing, another is the lack of ability to separate Russian risk and threat perceptions from Russian attempts to manipulate NATO's risk perception. The workshop highlighted that this inability allows Russia to manipulate risks 'on the cheap' to limit NATO's options, while preserving their range of options or even expanding them.

During the workshop it was also suggested that the Lukashenko regime in Belarus has the same intention to manipulate risks as Russia with hybrid activities along the Belarusian borders. This ability and intention were also considered to be done independently or semi-independently from Moscow.

Geostrategic assessments

The dialogue from the workshop pointed to geostrategic experiences as likely the reason why old ideas of the so-called Intermarium are again part of the strategic thinking of all four countries. This type of strategic thinking is perhaps most widespread in Poland. The Intermarium is the idea that the states between the Baltic

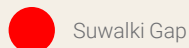
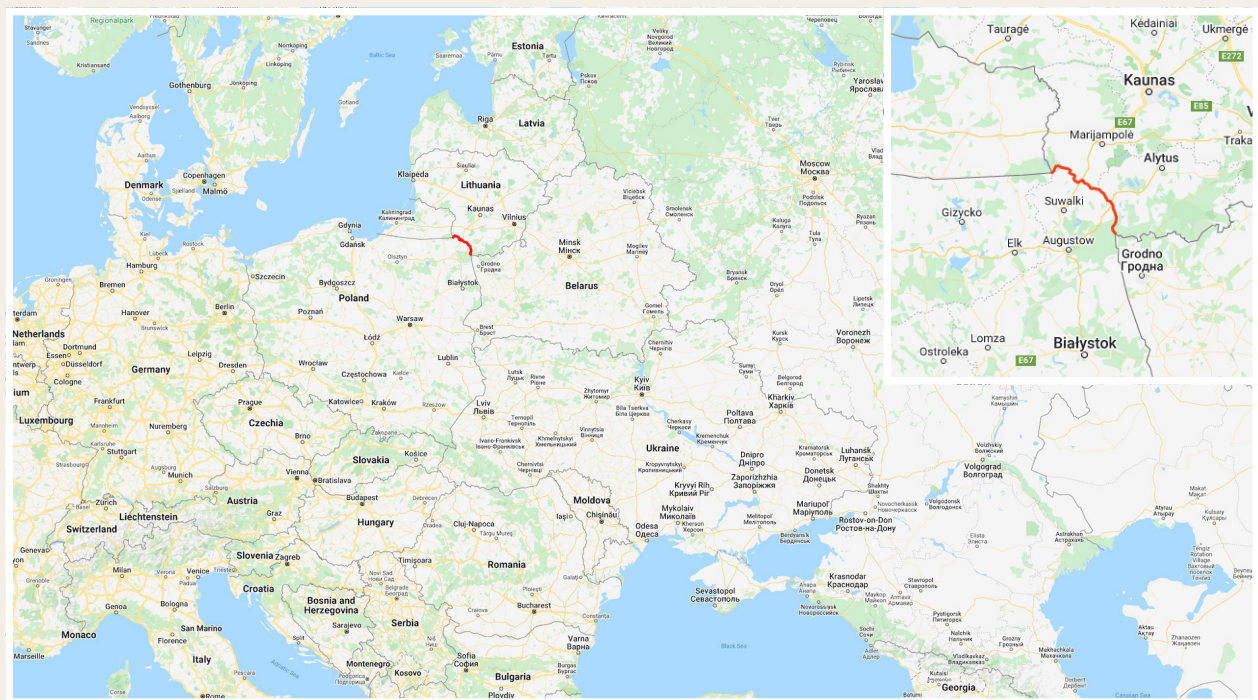
28 Matthew Thomas, 'Maritime Security Issues in the Baltic Sea Region', *Baltic Bulletin* (Baltic Bulletin, 22 July 2020), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/07/maritime-security-issues-in-the-baltic-sea-region/>; Dalia Bankauskaitė and Vytautas Keršanskas, 'Defeating Disinformation Threats', in *Baltic Security Strategy Report: What the Baltics Can Offer for a Stronger Alliance: Risk Assessment and Policy Recommendations* (Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2019).

29 For instance, the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) has launched a new programme to research the interconnectedness of nuclear energy and foreign and security policy, see *ICDS Will Study Implications of Nuclear Energy Development to Estonia's Strategic Partnerships*, 24 September 2021. <https://icds.ee/en/icds-will-study-implications-of-nuclear-energy-development-to-estonias-strategic-partnerships/>

30 Tomas Janeliūnas, 'The Long Shadow of a Nuclear Monster: Lithuanian Responses to the Astravyets NPP in Belarus', ICDS Analysis (Tallinn, Estonia: ICDS, March 2021), https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ICDS_Analysis_The_Long_Shadow_of_a_Nuclear_Monster_Tomas_Janeliunas_March_2021.pdf; Yuri Tsarik, 'Belarus Goes Nuclear: Context and Prospects of the Astravyets NPP', ICDS Brief (Tallinn, Estonia: ICDS, March 2021), https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ICDS_Brief_Belarus_Goes_Nuclear_Yuri_Tsarik_March_2021.pdf; Andrea Bonelli, 'ROSATOM in Europe. Russia's Trojan Horse?', ICDS Brief (Tallinn, Estonia: ICDS, March 2021), https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ICDS_Brief_Rosatom_in_Europe_Andrea_Bonelli_March_2021.pdf.

31 Murauskaite, 'Lithuania: Nuclear and Conventional Risk Assessments, and Policy Responses'.

Figure 2: The Suwalki Gap.



Source: <https://www.scribblemaps.com/>.

Sea region and Black Sea region must create a belt to resist pressure against the middle.³² At the workshop participants underscored that there is no northern nor southern dimension to NATO's eastern flank and that Russia's dual militarisation of both regions, Kaliningrad and Crimea respectively creates higher pressure or risks of escalations of conflict in the middle. Thus, this particularly affects the north-eastern flank countries.

Baltic and Polish concerns around the Suwalki gap underscore this perception of geographic interconnectivity and pressures against the middle. The Suwalki gap has become further pressurised under the ongoing dual militarisation and modernisation of the Southern and Western military districts. Apart from underscoring the importance of the reinforcement capabilities to the four countries, the participants found it equally important to emphasise that Russia operates with this geographical interconnectivity as was clearly proved with the most recent Zapad exercise. Russia's strengthened military capabilities, including anti access area denial (A2/D2), new bases along NATO and EU borders and the military build-up in Crimea and Kaliningrad demonstrate this ability to pressurise the Suwalki gap, as well as a Russian ability to escalate conflict beyond the north-eastern flank to other regions. Participants highlighted that the Suwalki gap was perhaps the weakest point and underscored that NATO must be able to defend and deter Russia from closing the Suwalki gap.³³

32 Vít Dostál, 'Understanding New Polish Intermarium: Trap or Triumph for the Visegrad Group?', Policy Paper (Association for International Affairs, June 2016), https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/amocz_PP_03_2016_web.pdf; Michta, *Poland*.

33 Participants also underscored missiles placed in Crimea can strike targets in Baltic Sea region alluding to the geographical interconnectivity.

Assessments of Deterrence Credibility

During the workshop it was discussed that the north-eastern flank countries are acutely concerned with the credibility of NATO's deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.³⁴ For the Baltic countries and Poland ensuring deterrence credibility is the most important task for NATO and as the perceived risks are of such varied or complex nature all four countries' concerns with deterrence credibility evolve around tailored deterrence. Participants agreed that conflict with Russia is not inevitable and assessed that the risk of conflict first and foremost depends on how NATO strengthens and adjusts its deterrence and defence posture.

Concerns around the defensibility of in particular the Baltic countries also feed into this discussion. Participants highlighted the paradox that neither Russia nor NATO want war, least of all a nuclear one, which ultimately raises the question of whether there is a better alternative to the current standoff.³⁵

Conventional versus Nuclear Deterrence

The 2016 NATO decision to create the eFP was, as one participant characterised it, a 'game changer' for the security of the north-eastern flank countries. In the current security environment however, the eFP is not considered adequate in terms of capabilities, presence and reinforcement ability. The credibility of the conventional deterrence posture in the Baltics and Poland suffer from the so-called 'reinforcement gap' that denotes the inability of NATO to provide and exercise what is needed for rapid reinforcement. Participants agreed that the credibility of NATO's conventional deterrence hinges on the alliance's ability to close this gap. This also underscores the concerns the four countries have around the alleged weakness of the Suwalki Gap and the importance of Intermarium for their strategic thinking.

This has also raised questions if the deterrence in the region should be nuclear for it to be credible.³⁶ This question is seen as increasingly important after the Russian modernisation of its conventional capabilities have resulted in Russian conventional supremacy in the Baltic Sea region, its large stockpiles of non-strategic nuclear weapons, and the latest three Zapad exercises that saw Russia exercising conventional and nuclear capabilities in the Western Military district.

When the participants discussed nuclear deterrence in the region however, concern remained if this would truly add to the security of the states. This line of thought starts with the concerns surrounding the defensibility of the region as well as concerns surrounding the impact of nuclear weapons if used on Baltic soil. It also plays into Baltic and Polish fears of the Alliance's commitment and in particular, the United States' commitment to the defence of the region, including Washington's willingness to engage in a nuclear exchange for the region.

During the workshop it became clear that the debate on nuclear deterrence and usage of nuclear weapons in the Baltic countries has an additional aspect to it. Participants highlighted that recent scholarship has shown a misconstrued understanding of nuclear deterrence and usage of nuclear weapons among military establishments in Estonia and Latvia that largely view nuclear deterrence through a Cold War prism, and that there seems to be little understanding of nuclear escalation and decision-making.³⁷ Apart from causing less

34 Jüri Luik and Tomas Jermalavičius, 'A Plausible Scenario of Nuclear War in Europe, and How to Deter It: A Perspective from Estonia', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 73, no. 4 (4 July 2017): 233–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1338014>.

35 Viljar Veebel, '(Un)Justified Expectations on Nuclear Deterrence of Non-Nuclear NATO Members: The Case of Estonia and Latvia?', *Defense & Security Analysis* 34, no. 3 (3 July 2018): 291–309, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2018.1500758>; Hedberg and Kasekamp, Baltic States.

36 Veebel, '(Un)Justified Expectations on Nuclear Deterrence of Non-Nuclear NATO Members'.

37 Veebel.

understanding and lack of interest in nuclear signalling, this misconstrued way of thinking may also have a profound impact on the ability of the alliance to engage the Baltic countries in the wider dialogue on the European security architecture and the nuclear arms control agenda.³⁸ The minimal institutional memory of nuclear politics and decision-making has its roots in the Cold War. The Baltic countries as Soviet republics were never privy to decisions relating to nuclear deterrence and had no military establishments separate from the Soviet Union.³⁹ Also, at the time of alliance accession in 2004 NATO was less occupied with nuclear strategy and deterrence, as the alliance was striving to build a partnership with Russia and the Rome Summit in 2002 had spoken about potential membership for Russia.

The United States & Deterrence Credibility

The workshop participants decided that the primacy of the United States for the credibility of deterrence and ultimately the defence of the region is undisputed. The discussion showed that all four countries are aligning themselves with the United States as evidenced by a general tendency to build defence policy around full support of the United States. All four countries for instance supported the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan with deployment of troops which in connection with the invasion of Iraq brought them on a political collision course with certain western allies.

The participants pointed out that The United States was considered the only power able to deal with a potentially revisionist Russia. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 only reinforced the Baltic and Polish sentiments and convictions of the overarching centrality of the United States for the security of the north-eastern flank.

This in turn is reflected in the four countries' scepticism of the defence abilities of the EU to ensure the security needs of these countries.⁴⁰ There is little interest in the Baltic countries as well as in Poland in European strategic autonomy as it in their view signals commitment to Europe over the Atlantic framework in the security sphere. Perhaps more importantly, it risks undermining NATO's role in Europe.

The workshop showed that the reliance on the United States is however associated with a few concerns. First, there are concerns around the ongoing US-Russia strategic stability dialogue that so far have resulted in two working groups, one on 'Principles and Objectives for Future Arms Control' and one on 'Capabilities and Actions with Strategic Effects'.⁴¹ This includes subjects that are of grave importance to the north-eastern flank countries and the workshop pointed out that there is a general concern that the risk assessments and security needs of the four will not be taken into account in this dialogue. Ultimately, there is a fear that the strategic stability dialogue will result in a range of agreements that will reduce the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrence, and divert attention away from the national security interests and defence needs of the four states.

Second, Russia's entanglement of nuclear and conventional capabilities as stipulated in Russian doctrine and displayed in the Zapad exercises are largely considered among the north-eastern flank countries to require a substantial tailored response. The participants emphasised that it seems to be of prime importance that this is reflected and recognised in the United States. The 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) did indeed

38 In addition, the Lithuanian constitution prohibits the stationing of weapons of mass destruction on Lithuanian soil potentially making it more difficult for Vilnius to demand a stronger deterrent, while at the same time being limited by constitutional provisions. Lithuanian constitution, Clause 101, Art 137.

39 Murauskaite, 'Lithuania: Nuclear and Conventional Risk Assessments, and Policy Responses'; Veebel, '(Un)Justified Expectations on Nuclear Deterrence of Non-Nuclear NATO Members'.

40 Hedberg and Kasekamp, Baltic States; Michta, Poland.

41 Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson. Joint statement on the Outcomes of the US – Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue in Geneva on September 30. Sep 30, 2021.



Deterrence and collective defence is viewed as an all-encompassing concept into which all dealings with Russia should be enrolled. Arms control for instance is viewed as a means to enhance deterrence, rather than an avenue for dialogue that may reduce risks.

launch a tailored response and acknowledged a lack of options and means to respond to the different levels of escalation from the Russian side.⁴² This was received in Poland and the Baltic countries as a timely and critical, yet somewhat belated and insufficient response to the Russian threat. According to the discussions at the workshop, there are concerns that the Biden administration's 2022 NPR may not be as accommodating to the security interests of the north-eastern flank countries. Neither sole purpose nor no first use is considered sufficient in response to the Russian threat, and either declaratory policy will if adopted eliminate a range of responses that the north-eastern flank countries are unwilling to surrender.

Challenges to Deterrence

Alliance dynamics

There was total agreement by all participants that the four states consider NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept insufficient for NATO-Russia relations. Poland is in particular engaged in influencing the new Strategic Concept to make 'the Polish position on the most important issues from the perspective of Poland's security and NATO's eastern flank' clear to its alliance partners.⁴³ The crux of the matter is of course that the security environment has changed significantly since 2010, and perhaps more importantly, the Concept is not viewed to have improved anything for the security in the area nor the development of the security architecture in Europe.

Participants agreed that NATO's strategic concept should in its upcoming review be replaced with a firm deterrence and collective defence concept that only under certain conditions allows for a dialogue with Russia. Deterrence and collective defence is viewed as an all-encompassing concept into which all dealings with Russia should be enrolled. Arms control for instance is viewed as a means to enhance deterrence, rather than an avenue for dialogue that may reduce risks.

The rejection of the cooperative approach to Russia has much to do with a sense of being frontline states that are under constant or continued pressure from Russia and where the risks of escalation are perceived as higher than further west. Alliance cohesion, the political solidity and solidarity of the alliance are of particular importance in the view of the participants, and there is a sense that the cooperative approach to Russia or a less adamant defence and deterrence posture equals a lack of political will to use military strength against an aggressive Russia.

⁴² Office of the Secretary of Defence, Nuclear posture Review, February 2018.

⁴³ Poland in NATO: Poland's input into NATO's next Strategic Concept, 13 December 2021. <https://www.gov.pl/web/nato-en/polands-input-into-the-work-on-natos-next-strategic-concept> last accessed 30 December 2021.

During the workshop participants pointed to a certain eastern flank understanding of deterrence. In this view a stable deterrence where risks are manageable, is seen to require a strong NATO posture, political resolve and alliance cohesion, and without these components the deterrence is considered unstable and the risk of conflict will grow. Dialogue or cooperative sentiments in other words will risk weakening the deterrence and political cohesion of the alliance. The ongoing strategic stability talks between Russia and the United States as mentioned above and also the P5 framework is therefore seen to (unintentionally) potentially compromise the north-eastern flank countries' national security. This means, seen from this particular regional perspective, that to reduce the risk of conflict, NATO's deterrence must be strengthened to stabilise the NATO-Russia deterrence relationship overall. In addition to this, a strong deterrence accompanied by a modernization of nuclear capabilities as well as posture in Europe is considered a necessary first step to bring NATO to a position where it is possible to negotiate with Russia. Put simply, there was agreement that NATO must become stronger before Russia can be engaged in any kind of risk reduction dialogue.

In this Eastern perspective, alliance cohesion is detrimental to NATO's deterrence posture and political resolve. This means that if alliance cohesion is weak the north-eastern flank countries fear that there is not sufficient collective political will to use NATO's strength.

During the workshop participants identified two avenues which might lead to weakened alliance cohesion. One is that Russia is able to exploit internal alliance disagreements, another that some allies continue to favour a more cooperative approach to Russia causing self-inflicted internal disagreements. The latter reflects the opposite understanding of how to create a stable deterrence relationship between NATO and Russia. The participants emphasised that these contradictory understandings of how to achieve deterrence stability appears to be a key issue and perhaps the main challenge to maintaining and strengthening alliance cohesion.

As such, participants underscored that some work could be done internally to strengthen alliance cohesion. Understanding the political importance that some NATO members attach to arms control and risk reduction is considered by the participants as crucial for strengthening and even keeping alliance cohesion. Thus, in their perspective to preserve alliance cohesion NATO should proceed with risk reduction and arms control as a second track. In the same manner, NATO members should also understand that the principle of indivisibility of security also applies in the area of risk reduction and arms control which in turn require political understanding of the sensitivity the north-eastern flank countries have in these areas.

How to avoid Conflict?

The relatively bleak outlook for NATO-Russia relations sparked a debate on whether relations with Russia was about reducing the scope of conflict, rather than avoidance of conflict.

While participants agreed that conflict is not inevitable, they agreed that NATO was the reactive part on the defensive and currently needs to adjust to a 'dramatically' new security environment. This means a strong deterrence, strengthening capabilities and crucially strengthening alliance cohesion.

Risk, Fear and Insecurity

Undoubtedly the historic experiences the four countries have had with both Russia and the West continues to inform current threat and risk assessments as does the near proximity to Russia and Russian allies.

Indeed, geopolitics and analogical reasoning influence states perceptions and policies, and for the north-eastern flank countries this arguably manifests itself in a tension between risk perception and heightened fear which ultimately may feed into an insecurity spiral.

First however, what is fear in international relations and how does it come about?

Fear

In international politics fear is often defined as a defensive reaction that creates an urgent desire to protect the state from the perceived threats or dangers. States' self-protection can be pursued through aggression or restraint, but when fear is the starting point of the urge to self-protect, states turn to restraint rather than aggression. However, at times when circumstances are not allowing states to act in restraint fear may produce an aggressive reaction towards the perceived threat or danger in order to self-protect. The end goal of self-protection however, sets this defensive aggression apart from offensive aggression which states resort to in an attempt to reach specific political goals, for example territorial expansion. Fear can have many root causes, such as historic experiences or being on the brink of nuclear war, but for fear to even exist two premises have to be met; capabilities and security. Thus, for fear to emerge, an opposing state must first be perceived to have the necessary capabilities and the will to use these and second, states must be concerned about their own security which provides the incentives to defend themselves against perceived threats.⁴⁴

As the participants reiterated throughout the workshop, Russia is perceived to have the necessary capabilities and the will to use these, and the north-eastern flank countries are indeed concerned for their security. The conditions for fear to emerge in the four countries' risk and threat assessments are certainly met, and it is apparent that all four are concerned with self-protection which they have been, since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, as mentioned above, the Baltic countries and Poland set out to build up their national capabilities and entered into NATO to be able to defend and protect their territories against a potentially revisionist Russia the moment the Cold War ended and the Warsaw Pact dissolved.⁴⁵ Arguably Russia found itself in an equally uncertain situation with unresolved questions surrounding national security after the Cold War as discussed above which may have produced fears that remain relevant today. In this regard there appears to be a lack of understanding in the West of Russia's fears which are a possible driver of Russian actions.

When looking at the tension between risk and fear, tensions appear primarily around two observations about Russia.

44 Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, 'Realism and Fear in International Relations', in *Realism and Fear in International Relations: Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer Reconsidered*, ed. Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-41012-8_1.

45 Michta, *Poland*; Hedberg and Kasekamp, *Baltic States*.

Russian Revisionism

The notion of Russian revisionism is often seen as a Russian effort to undermine the liberal world order. Clearly, an overturn of the rules-based order is a cause for great concern in the region that embedded their national security in the very same order following the end of the Cold War.

The Russian annexation of Crimea has been taken as evidence that Russia is attempting to overturn this order. Yet, it is apparent that Russia has not been engaged in a sustained effort to revise the rules-based order.⁴⁶ That does not mean that the annexation of Crimea was not illegal, rather it reveals something about Russia's perceptions of risks and threats and political aims in the CIS region. Arguably the claim that Russia is on a mission to overhaul the current rules-based order bases itself on an assessment of the outcome of Russian actions and perhaps more importantly, on the perceived intentions of Moscow.

Indeed, the international (Western) community raised concerns about the emergence of Russian revisionism in the Arctic shortly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. States and scholars were concerned if there would be a spill-over effect in the Arctic in the form of a Russian attempt to undermine the peaceful rules-based order in the region. However, there has been no evidence to support this claim. All Arctic institutions and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea that settles territorial claims of the continental shelf continue to govern the order in the Arctic with the full support of all Arctic states, including Russia.⁴⁷

The concept of Russian revisionism is hard to pin down. If it is not a sustained effort to overturn the rules-based order, it has been portrayed as a sort of Russian retreat from the post-Cold War order in Europe, including the territorial settlement. That line of thinking may be criticised for overlooking that Russia and NATO did not come to an all-encompassing agreement on the settlement of Europe and the European security architecture following the end of the Cold War as discussed above. Others are more in favour of viewing Russia as a 'status quo power' that is seeking to maintain the very order others argue Moscow wants to overturn. Protecting the status quo hardly constitutes revisionism though. Russia in this perspective seeks to enforce the established norms that are based on rules and international law in response to other States alleged circumvention or reformulation of the rules.⁴⁸ This is particularly clear in Ruth Deyermond's analysis of Russia's use of sovereignty when conducting its foreign policy.

Sovereignty is the core principle of the rules-based order. A state's sovereignty is something a state holds within its own territory and it forms the basis of inter-state relations. Yet, the 1990s humanitarian interventions redefined sovereignty in Western debates – now sovereignty was something that belonged to the populations of states, and not to the State, i.e., 'supreme authority within the territory'.⁴⁹ This meant that

46 Roy Allison, 'Russian Revisionism, Legal Discourse and the "Rules-Based" International Order', *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 6 (2 July 2020): 976–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1773406>; Ruth Deyermond, 'The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century Russian Foreign Policy', *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 6 (2 July 2016): 957–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1204985>.

47 Michael Byers, 'Crises and International Cooperation: An Arctic Case Study', *International Relations* 31, no. 4 (December 2017): 375–402, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117817735680>; Robert David English and Morgan Grant Gardner, 'Phantom Peril in the Arctic Russia Doesn't Threaten the United States in the Far North—But Climate Change Does', *Foreign Affairs*, no. September/October 2020 (n.d.).

48 Allison, 'Russian Revisionism, Legal Discourse and the "Rules-Based" International Order'; Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen, 'Russia and the Question of World Order', *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (15 March 2019): 133–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/023745118.2018.1545181>; Deyermond, 'The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century Russian Foreign Policy'; Tatiana Romanova, 'Russia's Neorevisionist Challenge to the Liberal International Order', *The International Spectator* 53, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 76–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2018.1406761>.

49 Samantha Besson, 'Sovereignty', in *Max Planck Encyclopedias of International Law*, Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law (Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law under the direction of Professor Anne Peters (2021–) and Professor Rüdiger Wolfrum (2004–2020), April 2011), <https://opil.ouplaw.com/view/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1472>.

the international (Western) community could intervene on humanitarian grounds as happened in Kosovo and Iraq despite the lack of UN Security Council resolution.⁵⁰ Russia rejected this redefined sovereignty concept for several interconnected reasons. It was seen as Washington's hegemonic attempts to overhaul the rules based order that not only secured Russia a place as a great power in the international system, but also a concept that could secure Russia a place in the multipolar world against the ensuing hegemonic order, and interestingly could protect Russian territorial integrity. Indeed, the new redefined concept of sovereignty ultimately threatened Russian territorial integrity that in the 1990s and early 2000s was at risk from former Soviet republics potential break away. This also explains why territorial integrity features prominently in Russian strategies, including the 2021 National Security Strategy.⁵¹

In other words, in the 1990s and 2000s it was not only the Baltic countries and Poland that was preoccupied with territorial integrity, but indeed, Russia itself. This also explains why the proceedings in the NRC for instance went sour as Russia - as mentioned above - was unwilling to discuss domestic matters.

Yet, Russian behaviour in the post-Soviet space, specifically the CIS region should, however, be viewed separately from Russia's dealing with the rest of the world, most notably the West.⁵² In general Russia is seen to have two approaches to the surrounding world, one designed for the West and one for the CIS region. Russia's invasion of Georgia and annexation of Crimea are clearly showing the different approaches. Russian behaviour in the CIS region is explained by a Russian preoccupation with dominating an area deemed crucial for Russian national security. The key however, is that it is a defence of the status quo, as it is perceived in Moscow and not necessarily a revision of the state of affairs.

Needless to say, the notion of Russian revisionism is disputed and the lack of clarity surrounding this may have a profound impact on the consistency and accuracy on assessments of the Russian intentions and threat and may contribute to a heightened fear. As the above indicates, 'revisionism' can encapsulate a number of observations about Russian intentionality.

The Russian Military Challenge

While Russia undoubtedly has an impressive military conventional and nuclear posture in Europe, the implications of it and Russian intentions with it may not be straightforward. The debate about Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) and the so-called escalate to de-escalate strategy illuminates this point.

The concept of A2/AD originated as a term to describe China's strategy to deny the United States and its allies' access to the Western Pacific area. While the term may be meaningful in this setting, Russian strategic thinking does not compare 1:1 to China's, the Russian geostrategic context is markedly different to China's and the concept of A2/AD does in fact not exist in the Russian strategic vocabulary.⁵³ What's more, Russian alleged A2/AD capabilities in the European context are based in Kaliningrad and Crimea presumably targeting the north-eastern flank countries and the Suwalki gap.⁵⁴

50 Deyermond, 'The Uses of Sovereignty in Twenty-First Century Russian Foreign Policy'.

51 The President of the Russian Federation, Order No 400: On the National Strategy of the Russian Federation, July 2 2021.

52 The CIS region consists of 12 former Soviet republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. The 'west' is the United States and NATO or EU member states.

53 Michael Kofman, 'It's Time to Talk About A2/AD: Rethinking the Russian Military Challenge', War on the Rocks (blog), 5 September 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/09/its-time-to-talk-about-a2-ad-rethinking-the-russian-military-challenge/>; Louis Simon, 'Demystifying the A2/AD Buzz', War on the Rocks (blog), 4 January 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/demystifying-the-a2ad-buzz/>.

54 Ian Williams, 'The Russia – NATO A2AD Environment', *Missile Threat CSIS Missile Defence Project* (blog), 3 January 2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/>.

However, as Michael Kofman argues, the A2/AD frame cannot be stretched to encompass the Russian military's operational concepts and strategy for large operations and more importantly, if one insists it results in a gross and general misreading of Russia's abilities and strategy in conflict. Misunderstanding the enemy clearly runs the risk of jeopardising the security of the alliance and may have grave consequences in a conflict situation.⁵⁵

So, how did this alleged misconception even gain such prominence in Western strategic thinking? Apart from being a somewhat comfortably short and neat concept, A2/AD makes it easy to grapple with Russia and the role of the United States in the European theatre. The United States is the expeditionary power and it appears somewhat logical for Washington to be preoccupied with access denial. It perhaps also underscores that some parts of the Western strategic community have lost the ability to understand Russia as the participants underscored at the workshop.⁵⁶

The debate around the so-called escalate to de-escalate strategy bears a resemblance to the A2/AD misconception. Escalate to de-escalate was de facto attributed to Russia with the Trump administration's 2018 NPR. Despite the Trump administration's association with post-truths, the claim that Russia has adopted this strategy was taken as read by many in the Western strategic community and formed the basis for the Trump administration's argument for stockpiling low yield nuclear weapons. Yet the existence of such a strategy and what it exactly is has come under increased scrutiny since the 2018 US NPR.

In general terms, the alleged 'escalate to de-escalate' is understood as a Russian strategy to escalate a conventional conflict by launching a first strike with low yield tactical nuclear weapons into the theatre early on to end the conflict on Russia's terms.⁵⁷ The core of the strategy is thus, a significantly lowered threshold and first use of nuclear weapons. This is, however, unfounded in any (unclassified) Russian strategies. Russia's declaratory policy states that the Kremlin 'reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction' against Russia or its allies 'as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the states is in jeopardy'.⁵⁸ This hardly indicates a low nuclear threshold and first use – besides, deterrence, in the words of Olikier and Baklitskiy, 'works best when the adversary understands which actions will trigger an undesirable response'.⁵⁹ In addition, Russia has (before France and the United Kingdom) re-declared with the United States and China that a nuclear war cannot be won, and must therefore not be fought.⁶⁰

When discussing if Russia indeed has such a strategy Kristin Ven Bruusgaard raises three points based on Russian material about the validity of the claim that Russia has such a strategy. First, the assumption appears to rest on Cold War strategic thinking about the utility of rapid escalation. This however overlooks that the difficulties with ensuring escalation control have been debated in Russia (and elsewhere) for years

55 Kofman, 'It's Time to Talk About A2/AD: Rethinking the Russian Military Challenge'.

56 Bringing to mind Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's misspelt 'reset' button Reuters Staff, 'Clinton, Lavrov Push Wrong Reset Button on Ties', *Reuters*, 6 March 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSNo6402140>.

57 Kevin Ryan, 'Is "Escalate to Deescalate" Part of Russia's Nuclear Toolbox?', *Russia Matters Harvard Kennedy School. Belfer Center* (blog), 8 January 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/escalate-deescalate-part-russias-nuclear-toolbox>.

58 The President of the Russian Federation, Executive Order: Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear deterrence, 8 June 2020

59 Olga Olikier and Andrey Baklitskiy, 'The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian "De-Escalation": A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem', *War on the Rocks* (blog), 20 February 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/nuclear-posture-review-russian-de-escalation-dangerous-solution-nonexistent-problem/>.

60 US-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability, 16 June 2021; The Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation 2001 has an article to that effect and was renewed by Russia and China in 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t15771.shtml last accessed 6 July 2021.



In general terms, the alleged ‘escalate to de-escalate’ is understood as a Russian strategy to escalate a conventional conflict by launching a first strike with low yield tactical nuclear weapons into the theatre early on to end the conflict on Russia’s terms.

and has, in fact, led to improved conventional options accompanied by a much needed conventional arms build-up in Russia since the 2010s. Second, the Western strategic community appears to argue with little regard for Russian planning that differentiates depending on the type of conflict. For example, Russia has never planned to use nuclear weapons in a limited war. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it rests on an assumption that nuclear weapons and their usage compensates for a lack of conventional weapons.⁶¹ This does not paint an accurate picture of Russian conventional capabilities today. Thus, to claim the existence of such a strategy inevitably rests on assumptions about Russian intentionality and possibly as some have argued conspiracies about a secret war plan.⁶²

However, it is not entirely unfounded that we talk about such a strategy. To begin with; escalation in conflict is in more than one way the very essence of conflict and to ensure escalation control in all phases of a conflict is equally central to conflict and warfare. Any state at any time has striven to have escalation control in conflict. Needless to say, escalation control could take the form of escalating the conflict to eventually de-escalate it. In the first nuclear age during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union both had similar strategies to use nuclear weapons as a means to escalate and de-escalate conflict as both sides had insufficient conventional capabilities. Today, the United States operates with a very similar nuclear strategy. Moreover, in the 1990s and 2000s there was an open discussion in Russia both in military and non-military circles about the necessity of Russia using tactical nuclear weapons to de-escalate a conflict as conventional capabilities were lacking.⁶³

The crux of the matter thus, according to Olikier and Baklitskiy, seems to be whether Russia has lowered the threshold of nuclear use. In addition, one could also add that it is not entirely clear when the very existence of Russia is in jeopardy which would, according to Russia’s 2021 nuclear declaratory policy, allow nuclear retaliation. The latter is clearly a political decision and it may be worthwhile recalling that not even the International Court of Justice was able to reach a definition of what constitutes an existential threat in its 1996 Advisory Opinion on the legality of the use or threat use of nuclear weapons.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, those who are strong believers in a Russian escalate to de-escalate strategy based on a lowered nuclear threshold tend to take Russian Zapad exercises and capabilities as testimony to the existence of such a strategy. Yet, the Zapad exercises (as well as most major exercises such as Vostok 2018) have had a nuclear component for years and it cannot be taken as evidence of a lowered threshold, nor can

61 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, ‘Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2 January 2021): 3–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070>.

62 Olikier and Baklitskiy, ‘The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian “De-Escalation”: A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem’.

63 Ryan, ‘Is “Escalate to Deescalate” Part of Russia’s Nuclear Toolbox?’; Olikier and Baklitskiy, ‘The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian “De-Escalation”: A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem’; Ven Bruusgaard, ‘Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority’.

64 International Court of Justice. Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/95>

the dual-use and tactical nuclear weapons build-up. Dual use weapons can be used in such a scenario, but having this capability does not mean the escalate to de-escalate strategy exists.

Ultimately this makes it difficult to come to any conclusion on whether Russia has an escalate to de-escalate strategy.⁶⁵ One could argue, as Poulsen and Staun do, that as Russia becomes conventional stronger, the less a prominent role will an 'escalate to de-escalate' strategy play if it exists.⁶⁶

However, what can be arrived at with more certainty is that the numerous Western conflict scenarios that play out the escalate to de-escalate strategy reinforce perceptions that it in fact exists. These limited war scenarios typically start with a Russian invasion of a Baltic country, NATO coming to its defence, followed by a Russian launching of a low yield nuclear weapon, ultimately placing NATO in a difficult situation. This arguably reinforces the perception of an increased willingness on part of Russia to use nuclear weapons (no matter how low yield) in a combat situation on NATO territory – specifically the north-eastern flank.⁶⁷ This not only runs the risk of increasing fear, but also supports a certain perception of Russia's intentionality.

Security and Insecurity

The Russian risk manipulation and high risk tolerance in and of itself may create a sense of insecurity in NATO, to be sure, doubts about Russian intentions, misreading of Russian strategies and concepts can certainly feed into a sense of a decrease of security. Yet, the inability to separate actual risks from fears can equally have a profound impact on NATO's ability to foster a balanced approach to Russia. The fear-based urge to self-protect and defend against perceived threats may magnify a sense of insecurity and thus, magnify the perceived needs for self-protection measures, such as arms build up to increase postures. Importantly, once fear is part of the equation the situation has to be contained for states to act with restraint and not aggression.

Russia has mighty conventional and nuclear capabilities to wage war in Europe. NATO and Russia are undoubtedly in need of a sustained and substantial conversation about the European security architecture, including the future relations between NATO and Russia.

Fear is part of that conversation. The fear of Russia is, as participants underscored continuously, also based on a lack of understanding of Russia. It appears that since the end of the Cold War parts of the Western strategic community have become somewhat analytically lazy and easily persuaded by overstretched concepts, such as A2/AD or 'new Cold War' that make little sense if scrutinised more closely, and more importantly, are the starting point of assumptions about Russian intentionality. Russia in turn has been supporting this fear by its risk manipulation, bold statements about the collective West and not least, by its behaviour in the Western and Southern Military districts.

65 Ryan, 'Is "Escalate to Deescalate" Part of Russia's Nuclear Toolbox?'; Olikier and Baklitskiy, 'The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian "De-Escalation": A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem'.

66 Niels Bo Poulsen and Jørgen Staun, *Russia's Military Might: A Portrait of Its Armed Forces* (København: DJØF Forlag, 2021).

67 Fred M Kaplan, *The Bomb Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War*, 2021, <https://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781982107314>; Luik and Jermalavičius, 'A Plausible Scenario of Nuclear War in Europe, and How to Deter It'; Ulrich Kühn, 'Preventing Escalation in the Baltics. A NATO Playbook' (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Kuhn_Baltics_INT_final_WEB.pdf; *Exploring the Role Nuclear Weapons Could Play in Deterring Russian Threats*. (RAND Corporation, 2019).

What is Next?

With the current situation in Europe the risk of escalation of the conflict between Russia and NATO is real.

This first workshop in BASIC's project 'Applying a Systematic Approach to Risk Reduction between NATO and Russia' has unearthed at least two perspectives that are important to the revitalisation of the NATO-Russia risk reduction agenda.

First, risk reduction between NATO and Russia is also about disentangling actual risk from fear – on both sides. Arguably, this is easier said than done. Recognising that the historic experiences and capabilities are two components that can introduce fear into the relationship on both sides is, however, necessary to rebuild a sustainable security architecture in Europe. For instance, as the workshop dialogue showed there is an apparent paradox that on the one hand, conflict with Russia is not inevitable, yet on the other fear of Russia and Russia's intentions vis-à-vis NATO exists concurrently.

Second, understanding and conclusions about Russian intentionality cannot rest on overstretched concepts and assumptions. This is hardly surprising, yet concepts and ideas about Russia that are less persuasive under closer scrutiny appear to flourish. Analysing the Russian exercises for instance in splendid isolation from the rest of the picture, is not only easy, but can lead to overly simplified conclusions such as the existence of a Russian escalate to de-escalate strategy.

BASIC promotes meaningful dialogue amongst governments and experts in order to build international trust, reduce nuclear risks, and advance disarmament.

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