

Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction

NATO's North-Eastern Flank Reacts to the War in Ukraine

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Introduction

This report is the third in a series of four 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 'Phase 2: Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction' that BASIC is undertaking in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹

Phase 2 complements and builds upon the lessons of Phase 1 (2019-2020) that explored risk and threat assessments in relation to the potential nuclear and conventional escalation primarily among Western NATO member states. The main finding in Phase 1 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 2 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 (Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Russia. Phase 2 will conclude with a Strategic Dialogue in the Autumn 2022 that brings together the participants from

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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/>.

both phases to foster mutual understanding and lay the groundwork to implement risk reduction proposals that are identified through the workshops.

The first Phase 2 report found that the historic experiences NATO's north-eastern flank countries have had with Russia and the West continues to inform threat 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.³

The workshop took place in Vilnius with participation of government officials and experts from all four countries. The workshop was held over two days one month after the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine and the workshop agenda was adapted to reflect the current situation. BASIC asked speakers and participants to discuss NATO's deterrence and defence, risk reduction, off-ramps and humanitarian issues in light of the conflict in Ukraine and the impact this conceivably will have on NATO-Russia relations in the future.

The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule.

A New Order

The participants were in agreement that the 1994 NATO-Russia Founding Act and the risk reduction instruments created at the 2002 Rome Summit cannot remain in place to deal with the relationship between NATO and Russia. Following the end of the current conflict there will be no return to the pre-war status quo and there is a significant need to adapt NATO's posture and strategic aims in the long term.

Deterrence

Participants quickly moved the discussion around deterrence to whether it had, in fact, worked or not. There was agreement that from a NATO perspective deterrence worked, as there has been no Russian invasion or attack on NATO. Participants however, seemed somewhat undecided on whether NATO's deterrence could have prevented the invasion of Ukraine or not. Some participants suggested that NATO deterrence failed to protect Ukraine from the invasion mostly because NATO kept quite clearly denouncing any NATO response in case of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. The assumption that NATO's deterrence had failed Ukraine had to do with the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit decision not to grant Ukraine or Georgia a MAP, but to invite both countries at some point in the future to join NATO. This accordingly had left Ukraine (and Georgia) without any security guarantees.

This in turn was rejected by other participants that argued that Ukraine's own deterrence had failed by not mobilising sufficiently in the wake of the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea.

The impact of the current conflict on NATO's future deterrence posture was quite clear. The participants all agreed that NATO needs a plan and a strategy on how to deal with Russia and this 'completely' new reality. There was complete agreement that NATO remains a nuclear alliance focussing on territorial defence and deterrence. The top priority is to sustain a credible deterrence and alliance cohesion. This in turn meant for the workshop participants that arms control cannot limit this core mission of NATO.

5 concrete proposals emerged during the workshop:

1. NATO's posture should move from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial. In this connection participants spoke about NATO developing a robust and capable missile defence system within the region, to target and neutralise Russian capabilities. This was a question that was addressed in the NATO summit last year where there were specific references to NATO integrated air and missile defence that would contribute to

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3. Gry Thomasen, 'Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North-Eastern Flank', BASIC Report (BASIC March 2022).

detering any air and missile threats, or to nullifying or reducing their effectiveness. Such a capability would also have been critical in helping Ukraine to defend itself.

2. NATO should move to forward defence on the eastern flank. In this connection participants raised that while brigade size forces in the north-eastern flank countries might not be politically achievable, it would sustain the security needs of the region into the future. It was also suggested that all four countries would have to take on more responsibility for building the new force posture. In this connection one participant suggested that the United States should contribute significantly with permanent troop deployment on the eastern flank.
3. NATO should close the so-called deterrence gap which denotes the disparity between NATO's conventional and nuclear forces. It was mentioned that having a strong non-nuclear deterrent not only decreases NATO's need to use nuclear weapons in conflict, but it also decreases the general risk that Russia would be tempted to start a non-nuclear conflict in which it could use nuclear weapons at some point.
4. NATO should not revert back to a Cold War posture. While the nuclear forces remain essential, participants did not think this was the right time to consider a no first use policy. The role of nuclear weapons is first and foremost to deter nuclear attacks and to do so NATO needs forward deployed capabilities, which are able to respond more proportionally and credibly to limited nuclear attacks, not to rely just on the massive use of strategic forces. This in turn means that NATO does not have to match Russia warhead for warhead.
5. The EU has a role to play in deterrence alongside NATO. It was suggested that measures towards a stronger EU deterrence and defence policy must dovetail with NATO, and it needs to strengthen the Transatlantic link to avoid a reduction of US engagement in Europe. In this connection, Chancellor Scholz's speech to the Extraordinary Session of the German Parliament on 27th February, was highlighted as a tectonic shift in German policy with clear repercussions for the rest of Europe and for NATO.

In connection with this debate on NATO's deterrence, it was raised that the north-eastern flank countries can indeed trust allies and partners and the somewhat widespread idea in these countries that they 'will be next' is in fact, Russian manipulation aimed at sowing doubt about the alliance's resolve and deterrence posture.

Lastly, it was mentioned that the Russian invasion of Ukraine had clearly denoted that Russia is willing to take higher risks. In combination with Russia's new presence in Belarus, Russia has been provided with other and new physical options for attacking NATO. This means according to some workshop participants that NATO's deterrence 'bar' must be higher.

Off-ramps and De-escalation

The workshop participants were divided on whether it would be useful to discuss off-ramps at the workshop. There was a general agreement it would be too early to discuss off-ramps, due to the situation on the ground and a widespread perception among participants that Putin did not want off ramps, that NATO's previous attempts to reach out to Russia and build partnership has now been exhausted, but perhaps most importantly, offering Russia off ramps was considered appeasement. Now was the time to isolate Russia. NATO and partners should follow a policy of 3 S's in order to support Ukraine: Supplies, sanctions and solidarity meaning that:

- NATO should support Ukraine politically, economically, militarily and humanely.
- NATO member-states should sanction Russia and Belarus. The current sanctions regime should be continued without hesitation and expanded to Belarus that after the referendum could become a so-called Russian stronghold in particular as it is no longer a constitutionally nuclear weapons free zone.
- NATO should have solidarity with Ukraine and crucially among the alliance member states themselves and with like-minded partners.

Despite this, some workshop participants found discussing potential off-ramps to be a useful analytical exercise so as to be ready for when the time was right. The moment for discussion of off-ramps or de-escalation was dependent on the situation on the ground and needed to be led by Ukraine. In this discussion three perspectives emerged on the conditions for de-escalation and what types of measures could be valuable.

Firstly, and most importantly, NATO has to look to Ukraine for what would be acceptable to Ukraine. Secondly, NATO should look to the NATO member states neighbouring Ukraine and Russia to what would be acceptable to these countries before finally, taking into consideration the preferences of the rest of the West, including the United States.

Secondly, once Russia has left Ukraine the question then becomes what kind of settlement will be acceptable not just for Ukraine and the West, but also for Russia. This touches upon perceptions of loss and defeat. For instance, what does it mean for Russia to be defeated? Capitulation was considered highly unlikely by the workshop participants, instead Russia would remain a political actor able to demand or call for certain solutions. This will be a difficult situation, as the wish from the north-eastern flank for instance would be that Russia would become as weak as possible, unable to develop its military-industrial complex and unable to invest in arms. This scenario however, would undoubtedly create a frustrated Russian population, mobilise the population around the flag and around the political regime - whichever regime that might be. Similarly, if Russia does not get a sufficiently face-saving off-ramp, the regime could turn more dangerous.

Thirdly, sanctions. Here the question was which sanction should be removed first and under which conditions. It was suggested that the easiest and most convenient way for the West would be to remove some of the restrictions on airspace and air companies. Still, participants agreed that currently any talks about sanctions and off ramps should be kept as an internal debate and not shared with Russia. It was believed that sharing deliberations on sanctions relief too soon would remove focus from the current efforts to end the conflict.

Nuclear Risks and War

The workshop discussion also identified nuclear risks. Although participants agreed that the risk of a nuclear war is slim, the risk has nevertheless gone up compared to before the invasion of Ukraine. The 2021 reissuance of the Reagan-Gorbachev formula should not be underestimated and in comparison to the situation in 1962, the current stand-off has little if any resemblance. Although it may be difficult to read Putin's intentions and objectives as well as it is difficult to identify the threshold for nuclear usage, the risk of nuclear conflict remains slim because nuclear weapons use in Ukraine would 'cross the line' leading to a reply from NATO, as well as participants highlighted the robustness of nuclear risk reduction measures.

Yet there was agreement that NATO should be ready for contingencies. Russia's attacks on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the Belarusian constitutional referendum in February 2022 that allowed Russia stationing nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil and a formal abandonment of Belarusian neutrality, reveals a Russian ploy to escalate nuclear risks in the region. The 'new' Belarusian position also has implications for the conventional defence of NATO.

Participants identified 4 scenarios:

- The unlikely and unrealistic scenario. It has been suggested elsewhere that Russia could respond to the Western deliveries of weapons to Ukraine and the sanctions imposed with nuclear weapons. This was, however, considered extremely unlikely. What would Russia stand to gain from such a scenario?
- The most likely avenue for nuclear weapons use is in the event of a NATO-Russia war. While it is realistic to expect that such a conflict would be stopped before nuclear weapons use, there is no guarantee that either side would be able to control the escalation of the conflict.
- Uncertainty around Russian doctrine and Russia's notion of 'existential threat' is another scenario in which nuclear weapons could be used. What is the real threshold of nuclear use for Putin? What does he treat as an existential threat – not only for Russia as a State, but also for him remaining in power? Perhaps the prospect of

losing the war against Ukraine, especially with the material aid from NATO, is something that could be a threat to his internal position and seen as a move to oust him from power.

- Finally, there is a risk of mistakes, accidents or provocations going too far that could trigger a nuclear response. For instance, Russia violating NATO's airspace with their aircrafts could lead to an inadvertent escalation. There could be mistakes, i.e., missiles that were meant for Ukrainian soil hit NATO soil. Or under the Article V threshold of nuclear attacks, some sabotage attempts against delivery systems could be interpreted as an attack on the nuclear deterrent.

On Putin's 'threats' to use nuclear weapons, for instance in connection with no-fly zones, participants interpreted the primary goal to be to prevent NATO from intervening in the conflict on Ukraine's side.

Risk Reduction Measures

In connection with the debate around the risk of nuclear escalation, NATO countries were seen to have taken several steps to reduce the risk of escalation, most importantly the significant increase of NATO's presence on the eastern flank. In addition, the 'measured' response to Russia's nuclear threats was a kind reminder that NATO is a nuclear alliance without engaging in any exchange of threats. The Biden administration's decision not to test one of its ballistic missiles and the new channel between the United States and Russia in Europe, the EUCOM, which is allegedly being used, were all perceived to be appropriate risk reduction measures.

It was also raised that the future settlement or agreement to finish the conflict may very well include a number of measures connected to arms control, risk reduction and confidence building for it to be acceptable to all. These measures could include elements connected to force posture, non deployment zones, non-exercise zones and the presence of foreign troops in Ukraine.

While participants remained convinced of the robustness of the nuclear risk reduction measures and the strategic stability framework, strategic stability however would not necessarily create stability in Europe and it was highlighted that it is difficult to imagine New Start without addressing this as well.

Signalling and Red Lines

In connection with the workshop discussion of risk reduction and deterrence in the current situation participants also discussed signalling.

Some participants argued that the Ukrainian deterrence signalling vis-à-vis Russia clearly failed. Russia did not see the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian State as capable. Either the Kremlin did not see it, or they did not treat it seriously. This may be repeated with regards to some of NATO's militaries. For example, the Kremlin may think that some militaries cannot fight without the United States.

NATO's communication was very clear. Yet, it did not work or it was not believed by the Kremlin. Again, it was clear according to participants that the signalling failed to penetrate which is not necessarily evidence that the Kremlin is an irrational actor. This should be taken into account in the future deterrence posture and signalling.

It was also mentioned several times during the workshop that NATO has not conveyed anything about a potential military response. Instead, NATO has issued numerous statements about what NATO would not do - for instance, no NATO troops in Ukraine, essentially making NATO's red lines so clear that Russia has taken it as a carte blanche to get going. This should also be considered in connection with the future deterrence and defence of the Alliance.

This line of thinking however, was nuanced or criticised by other participants that found it too easy. Rather, it was pointed out that the clear communication was also aimed at calming the public. Fears of escalation and the risk of escalation was on the rise and it necessitated a clarification that NATO is not going to war. While participants found agreement that it

might have been too much signalling to Russia, it remains important to consider that aspect as well. One participant mentioned en passant that the Obama administration in the wake of annexation of Crimea had stated that the United States would not be sending weapons to Ukraine, which essentially was a message to Russia that they could indeed escalate. Participants agreed that a similar dynamic needed to be avoided in this war.

Finally, some participants warned against 'overemphasising' the need for avoiding escalation. It is well known that NATO wishes to avoid escalation and by overemphasising, NATO risks simplifying Russian calculations of what they can get away with in Ukraine. Some participants, in other words, found it important to maintain some ambiguity in NATO's signalling.

Alliance Cohesion

Alliance cohesion, unity and solidarity were considered the most important measures currently.

However, Eastern flank countries feel a need to capitalise on the current conflict to ensure enhanced forward defence along the Eastern flank. This clearly speaks to a continued fear that alliance cohesion is fleeting and that the Eastern flank countries may not receive the support they require for their defence. In this connection it was also mentioned that some of the European NATO members that pledged to invest in their national defence in 2014 after the Russian invasion of Crimea, refuse to commit to anything beyond the reiterated 2014 2% pledge.

In the same manner, it was raised during the workshop that some EU countries were suffering more from the sanctions introduced by the EU than others and there was a call for increased solidarity in this respect, as well as a burden sharing mechanism that would support the countries hardest hit by the EU sanctions to ensure that the sanctions regime could be maintained further.

Putin and Russia in the Future

During the workshop proceedings, the question of what Russia would look like after the conflict was also brought up. Participants agreed that in all likelihood, NATO would be dealing with a very different Russia. Russia will likely be weaker which in turn could lead to a vengeful or desperate Russia, especially if Putin stays in power. Ultimately, it raises questions about what kind of Russia NATO should be prepared for and what strategic aims Russia might have in the long term.

It was suggested that the working assumption should be that NATO would have to deal with a weakened, humiliated and angrier Russia that would remain committed to the same basic direction in its foreign and security policies.

It is, however, easy to contemplate an internal collapse of Russia, or the emergence of a totalitarian state, but also a state that could seek peaceful coexistence Cold War style.

Ukraine

During the workshop participants also raised questions about a neutral Ukraine and what it would mean for NATO's deterrence. In all likelihood, Ukraine will be asking for some kinds of security guarantees. This question cannot be answered, however, until we know what type of security guarantees can be provided. Only then can the implications for NATO's deterrence be identified. In all probability, Ukraine would require a security guarantee from the United States. In this instance where Ukraine would exclusively look to have a security guarantee from the United States it was considered a critical question how it would be possible to have such a security guarantee that does not involve NATO. It is conceivable that it would involve the United Kingdom and the United States.

China

China and NATO's relationship was also briefly touched upon. NATO should find ways to separate Russia and China. It is clear that Russian and Chinese interests are not necessarily aligned. The key challenge for NATO is how to frame dialogue with China. Usually, they speak about arms control but it is to no avail as NATO and China's goals are not aligned on this topic. NATO does not have the structures to institutionalise NATO's engagement with China. It was believed it cannot take place at the level of councils as it did with the NATO-Russian Council, but somehow NATO must find ways to convey concerns and interests.

The Humanitarian Response in Europe and Solidarity

The discussion quickly came to evolve around solidarity between NATO and EU member states and Ukraine.

In the case of the latter, participants raised that the many debates both within NATO and the EU around what kind of military equipment and how much equipment they were willing to support Ukraine with has shown a lack of solidarity with Ukraine and may have resulted in a lack of credibility of NATO and in a broader sense a lack of solidarity in Europe.

Looking at the economic perspective, participants raised the unwillingness of the EU and in particular Germany, to accept economic losses when talking about cutting off Russian gas and oil supply. There is a sense of anger over this decision in the eastern flank countries. While it may be understandable that the EU cannot go into a recession, it remains a major inflow of cash to Russia to feed the war machine. This reveals there is no consensus in EU around what the Union can do in terms of economic pressure, instead Putin has manoeuvre room for dictating economic terms, such as demanding payment in Roubles to keep the Rouble afloat. That being said, participants also identified that 'de-Putinising' the European economies is not in any way a simple exercise and that it will be prolonged, complex and is still ongoing.

One participant also addressed the 'narrative of unity'. Arguably, its importance is overstated. There have been differences and schisms within the EU and NATO for years, such as Brexit, issues with the Polish political environment and with the Hungarian political views. There have been plenty of attempts to form different parallel discussions, in multilateral, bilateral, trilateral formats. Those issues have not gone anywhere. It would be a mistake to keep repeating how united Europe is on this. Presumably, Germany and France will continue to attempt to push their agenda, in establishing channels of communication, in showing leadership or driving particular efforts which are not necessarily problematic but may not reflect the policy preferences of all EU member-states. While it is clear that there is a broad agreement on a strategic level, a willingness to recognise the significant differences that have been there for years would allow the EU to be in a much better position to capitalise on individual efforts by countries.

Refugees

The discussion around refugees was quickly associated with disinformation. While the public opinion might be very positive at the moment, further down the line it might change. In this connection the Russian disinformation campaign about the alleged crimes committed by Ukrainian refugees in countries that have taken them in and other more subtle negative messaging can become a critical point of pressure on domestic opinion. There were expressed concerns about the EU member states' abilities to deal with disinformation. Notwithstanding the NATO Centre of Excellence on STRATCOM and that the EU has set up a unit dealing specifically with these issues, the main issue was the absence of political recognition that this is indeed an issue in some European states.

Concluding Remarks

The workshop discussions over the two days also revealed certain outstanding issues that need to be addressed.

First, there is a need to continue the conversation around what the Russian end goal in Ukraine is and how to deal with Russia in the future. This includes open questions about the final settlement of the war.

Second, NATO should continue (or begin) the discussion about the end goal for Ukraine. How can NATO support Ukraine in reaching its desired end goal and what is feasible for NATO?

Third, how should NATO deal with Belarus?

Fourth, while workshop participants appeared in full agreement that it is too early to discuss off-ramps and de-escalation, it remains to be identified what will be possible and when the right time is to consider de-escalation.

Fifth, how should NATO deal with the public fears of a nuclear war?

Sixth, what should NATO do in the highly unlikely event that the conflict does escalate to nuclear war, through Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine? How should NATO react to the potential usage of other WMDs, such as chemical weapons?

Seventh, while there appeared agreement that arms control is infeasible at the moment, it remains to be discussed how to fill the arms control void in the future.

Eight, NATO needs to formulate a long term, comprehensive vision for its deterrence. The work on this has only just started.

Ninth, where does the invasion leave the non-proliferation regime? What impact might it have on the upcoming NPT Review Conference?

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