

# Risk Reduction and De-Escalation

---

Gry Thomasen

## Introduction

In June 2022 BASIC held a virtual roundtable with Russian experts to discuss nuclear, conventional and political risk reduction. The roundtable is part of the two-year project entitled 'Phase 2: Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction' that BASIC is undertaking in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Phase two complements and builds upon the lessons of phase one (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 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.<sup>1</sup>

Phase two was initially intended to continue 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. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 however altered the project. Since the invasion, BASIC has not engaged with Russian government officials. We do believe however that dialogue remains essential. We gathered a range of Russian experts to discuss risk reduction and crisis de-escalation in general terms. For the purpose of the discussion, BASIC

---

<sup>1</sup> Messmer, 'Strategic Risk Reduction in the European Context'.

provided a set of guiding questions (see Annex 1). The Roundtable took place in June 2022 and was held under the Chatham House Rule.

BASIC would like to thank all participants for taking the time to share their thoughts and assessments with us.

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 for implementing risk reduction measures that have been identified through the workshops.<sup>2</sup>

# Findings

## Political Escalation

Political escalation in all its forms represents a massive challenge to de-escalate the current situation. One form of political escalation is 'verbal inflation', where statements made on both sides which are effectively burning the bridges to de-escalation and dialogue. In this connection the role of the mass media cannot be underestimated as it is in some instances uncritically providing outlets for escalatory statements. Political escalation also refers to specific acts, such as the Russian decisions to hand out Russian passports outside the Donbass region or the introduction of Russian telecom systems in the same area. Likewise, the Ukrainian decision to ban some Russian art is political escalation.

In general, dialogue between adversaries is extremely important on all levels in a conflict and it is a mistake to close down relations between Russian and western track 2 institutions, as it closes down routes to civil society relationship development and trust building.

## Military Escalation

The military escalation in this conflict is associated with specific problems that need to be addressed.

To begin with, there are no red lines, but grey zones. For instance, it has never been clarified by either side at what particular point NATO assistance to Ukraine will be regarded by the Kremlin or NATO as a direct involvement in the conflict. In addition, though on a smaller scale, it is unclear at which point Belarus will be considered part of the conflict by the West.

Assuming that both sides are not interested in maintaining the current unconstructive ambiguity, these red lines need to be clarified. Both sides need to get closer to a definition of red lines for them to be able to keep them in mind while planning their specific actions on the ground.

Currently there is no military to military dialogue and there has not been one for a long time. The need to re-establish this military to military dialogue is increasingly important as both sides are amassing troops and military equipment along the borders of Poland and Belarus. Such a dialogue could be used to clarify changes quickly in order to avoid escalation.

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomasen, 'Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank'; Thomasen, 'Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction. NATO's North-Eastern Flank Reacts to the War in Ukraine'.

# NATO-Russia Relations

The NATO summit in Madrid is expected to clarify NATO's perception of the strategic situation in Europe, including coming to an agreement on a new posture and strategy. Nobody expects the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) to resume its work. The NATO summit decisions provide an opportunity to establish or re-open the communication between Russia and NATO. This opportunity should not be rejected because risks are growing and the parties are moving away from a preliminary settlement or a final settlement of the conflict.

In addition, it is important that NATO clarifies the status of the proposals NATO presented to Russia (which were leaked by El Pais in January 2022) in reply to the treaty proposals that Russia put forward in December 2021. It should be clarified what can still be considered and what is no longer regarded relevant by NATO.

## Non-Proliferation Regime

It is important to emphasise that the conflict in Ukraine is one of several international issues that are currently presenting a risk to the non-proliferation regime.<sup>3</sup> This only underscores that the regime should be protected and states must be mindful not to allow more instability into the regime.

In discussing how to deal with a crisis in relation to the upcoming RevCon, the question is if the Conference should be isolated from the current crisis or whether it can be brought into the deliberations in a constructive way. On one hand, siloing the RevCon from the ongoing crisis may turn out to be quite difficult, on the other it could instead provide an impetus for reform of the regime. Arguably, the current crisis of the regime provides an opportunity to reform or refocus on how the treaty regime can succeed in a changing global setting, for instance with the rise of multipolarity or even multiorder.

Yet, it can be argued that the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 was allowed to overshadow the 2015 RevCon, which resulted in a less productive meeting. In this view, it would be wise to somehow compartmentalise the conflict from the regime. For instance, some sanctions against Russia inhibit or complicate Russia's commitment to build nuclear power plants in Africa which in turn may undermine NPT Article IV.

Regardless, it remains important to recall that non-proliferation agreements were developed because of a commonly shared interest between a range of states to commit to non-proliferation. It may be useful to reassure each other that these priorities remain in place despite political tensions and conflicts, and it could be a fruitful avenue to attempt to refocus diplomatic efforts to more neutral areas, such as securing the inalienable right to peaceful nuclear energy.

Much in the same manner, recognising states' achievements and inputs and highlighting the joint efforts that have already succeeded may be a valuable adjustment of the current hostile and uncooperative narrative, essentially preventing political leadership from taking steps, such as making public statements or anything else that contradicts the general narrative. Experts, scholars and NGOs can play a crucial role in cleaning up the narrative and enabling states towards dialogue.

Other regimes are confronting the same issue of how to tackle important non-proliferation work despite the Russian invasion, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). This is a major challenge as the MTCR is the only workable technical regime dealing with missile proliferation.

It might be worth recalling when discussing whether to silo areas from current crises or events, that the Arctic which has otherwise been adamant to remain an area of cooperation and not conflict, did in fact not silo itself from the conflict. The

---

<sup>3</sup> Messmer, 'The Impact of Russia's War against Ukraine on Multilateral Nuclear Diplomacy'.

Arctic Council – under the chairmanship of Russia at the time of the invasion – decided to pause all the official meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies. This only goes to show how difficult it is to silo crises or conflicts from other business.

## Arms Control

The prospects of arms control are dire. The need to re-establish the dialogue is crucial, yet, it is evident that arms control does not thrive in bad weather as the breakdown of the CFE Treaty and negotiations of the updated Vienna Document clearly shows. The need to establish military to military dialogue at diplomatic level is necessary to re-start arms control.

However, recognising that the current hostile environment makes arms control increasingly difficult, a ministerial dialogue could be discreetly restarted via politically neutral topics where there are no opposing standpoints, such as terrorism or emergency situations and natural disasters. In addition, Cold War-style top down decisions can be another avenue for re-starting the dialogues on arms control however this type of leadership appears to be absent currently.

# Recommendations

1. A first necessary step for all parties to the conflict is to stop the political escalation in order to enable further dialogue.
2. After the NATO summit there is an opportunity to rebuild communication lines between Moscow and Brussels and to re-start the dialogue. A NATO-Russian ad hoc crisis management group could serve as a substitute for the NRC.
3. All sides in the conflict should clearly define red lines. In particular in regards to what the sides consider direct involvement in the conflict.
4. Establish the military to military dialogue to mitigate the risks of misunderstandings and misperception on the border between Poland and Belarus in particular.
5. Establish military to military dialogues at diplomatic level to restart dialogue on arms control. This can be done in a two step fashion. First through discreet dialogue on neutral topics and second in a top-down process that reflects how high political decisions require the highest political approval.
6. The parties should make a joint or parallel statement(s) before the NPT RevCon to recognise that despite the current conflict, the nuclear weapon states remain committed to the Reagan-Gorbachev pledge which they made in Jan 2022.
7. Assuming that the adversaries have utilised mechanisms that were established to prevent escalation, a joint or parallel statement that these mechanisms were used can improve the diplomatic climate and serve as reassurance to the general public.
8. All sides in the conflict should reaffirm their commitment to nuclear non-proliferation.
9. In preparation for the next review cycle, NGOs, experts and scholars should launch an information campaign to recognise the joint successes.

# Annex 1

## Guiding Questions

1. What does risk reduction mean during a crisis? What are the purposes of risk reduction during a crisis?
2. What is the relationship and linkages with arms control? During and after a crisis.
3. How to ensure that the sides continue to communicate during a crisis
4. How to deal with intentional escalation of a conflict? As opposed to inadvertent or accidental escalation.
5. Which risk reduction measures can be used to manage an ongoing crisis or conflict?
6. Which measures would be desirable in a post-conflict environment? (Either to work through the previous crisis or to prevent another crisis)
7. How can the level of risk required for deterrence be reconciled with the need for stability, especially in a crisis?
8. Are there any situations in which higher levels of risk may be desirable?
9. Which risk reduction measures can manage nuclear security and safety in crisis?
10. How can one prevent the spillover of ongoing conflict into international regimes?

## Acknowledgment

This report is part of BASIC's project Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction that is generously funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The report does not directly reflect the views of the Dutch government. BASIC is grateful for the financial support received for this project.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the  
Netherlands

Dr Gry Thomasen is a Senior Policy Fellow at BASIC. Gry is Programme Manager of BASIC's programmes on Risk Reduction and Nuclear Disarmament. Gry's background and expertise is in the evolution of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and nuclear risk reduction. She is also an expert in Arctic security. Gry currently researches risk assessments and policy options for risk reduction in the EuroAtlantic area and the Arctic. In 'Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-

Russia Risk Reduction', she researches current risk assessments in Russia and Eastern Europe, including NATO's north-eastern flank countries, and explores policy options for risk reduction measures. Gry also leads research on risk assessment and policy options for risk reduction in the Arctic region in relation to strategic resources, sea routes and human security. Gry holds a PhD in contemporary international history from the University of Copenhagen and was awarded a postdoc grant from the Carlsberg Foundation to undertake research into the evolution of the nuclear non-proliferation regime at the Danish Institute for International Studies. Before joining BASIC Gry has been a visiting postdoctoral research fellow at the Cold War History Research Centre in Budapest and a visiting research fellow at King's College London, Centre for Science and Security Studies. In addition, Gry holds an MA in History with Russian from the University of Copenhagen and a BA in History and Russian from the University of Copenhagen and the Moscow State University, MGU.