

Risks and Risk Reduction

A View from the South-eastern Flank

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Introduction

In September 2022 BASIC held a track 1.5 workshop in Sofia to discuss risk and threat assessments in South-eastern and Northern Europe. The workshop 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.

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.

Phase two set out 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 and South-eastern flank countries and Russia. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, BASIC has not engaged Russian government officials, although we have maintained our cooperation with Russian experts.

The workshop was held under Chatham House Rule and was attended by official representatives and experts from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Finland and Sweden. BASIC would like to thank all participants for taking the time to share their thoughts and assessments with us.

NATO

Participants were in agreement that the war in Ukraine has underscored that for NATO to maximise the effectiveness of measures towards Russia, NATO unity and joint coordination of the approach to Russia is of utmost importance.

There is an overall need for reaching NATO allied consensus and also prioritising mechanisms that are deemed essential to the functioning of the European security architecture. Participants felt that the Vienna Document, the Treaty of Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, as well as the Open Skies Treaty, are all crucial elements in preserving European security. Participants also put forward the conviction that, albeit imperfect, the functioning of the European security apparatus remains intact and does not require fundamental redesign. In addition to this, participants found that there is an imminent need for deeper cooperation on nuclear safety in light of the recent events surrounding the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant¹.

Participants were clear in stating that NATO faces its greatest threat in recent history and as a result of escalating Russian aggression, it remains imperative to reset NATO's collective posture, particularly with respect to the Eastern flank, and to also strengthen it across all domains by delivering a credible, coherent and integrated NATO deterrence and defence posture on the Eastern flank. The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept was seen as delivering this and participants emphasised Romania's influence on the Strategic Concept by having stressed the strategic importance of the Black Sea region and the Southern and Western Balkans for the alliance. The new Concept is markedly different from the deliberations at the 2016 Warsaw summit where the discussions around forward defence and tailored defence 'somehow' left the Eastern flank divided into a north-eastern area, and eastern and south-eastern area. The 2022 Strategic Concept was interpreted as mitigating this line of thinking.

Other participants stressed that although the Strategic Concept was negotiated during a watershed moment with conventional war in Europe, other 'threats' to national security, such as 'illegal' migration², terrorism, economic and social challenges, a pandemic, rising energy prices, food insecurity and increasing competition for natural resources should be engaged by NATO as well.

When suggested that the Strategic Concept must also consider the war in Ukraine, as well as the repercussions on states' security, some participants warned that NATO risked 'push[ing]' Russia and China closer together and cautioned against managing the relationships with China and Russia as if they are posing the same 'like-for-like' threat to NATO.

Along the same lines of thinking, some participants spoke about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Events in Ukraine have solidified the North Korean assumption that it has to have a nuclear programme and nuclear arsenal in order to support its long term survival and the survivability of the regime. This can be considered as a direct consequence of events in Eastern Europe.

Participants also found that NATO must increase cooperation with and political support to the eastern partners, particularly Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

NATO – Russia

Understanding Russia and Putin's intentions was another topic of the deliberations. Some participants found that Russia does not want to compromise, or at least Moscow would only want to settle the security situation in Europe in a way that leaves the West weakened. According to this line of thinking, NATO needs to arrive at a joint position on what NATO is willing to accept in order to remain 'strong, powerful and credible'. This implied that agreeing to any 'face saving' option for Putin was considered by participants as appeasement and any mention of 'off-ramps' was interpreted as politically weak. One participant, however, put forward the belief that because Russia has a very different view of security in Europe, NATO cannot know at which point Russia can accept a compromise without a face loss.

The remarks about reaching a 'compromise' also sparked a conversation about the role of NATO for the settlement of the current conflict. Some participants argued that it was a matter for Ukraine and Russia alone to agree to reach a settlement

¹ The fear of adversaries weaponizing nuclear power plants (NNP) was also raised at BASICs workshop with the Northeastern flank countries where the Astravets NPP raised similar concerns. See, Gry Thomasen, *Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank* (London, United Kingdom: BASIC, 2022).

² It was not further elaborated upon what exactly 'illegal migration' was.

of the war even though it would have an impact on NATO's security environment and have a serious impact on the Eastern flank countries. Rather, it was argued that the conflict is binary in the sense that it is 'theirs' and not 'ours'.

The vast majority of the participants found that NATO should have / facilitate some form of dialogue with Russia and it was suggested that a first step could engender the United States and NATO jointly presenting a clear list of requirements: what would NATO expect from Russia to re-engage in some sort of bilateral relations in a more substantial manner? At present, NATO has not articulated a clear list of conditions under which relations can resume. This would constitute an important first step in creating the framework and creating expectations for resuming relations and conflict termination³. It was also argued that the Western flanks of the NATO alliance may have a convergence of views, however these are not shared by the Eastern part and perhaps more importantly there is a diversity of views on the Eastern flank under which conditions relations can resume.

One issue that emerged concerned a clash of conceptions of security between Russia and Central Eastern European States; Russia appears to understand its security as having a certain degree of influence and control over the fate of the countries in central Eastern Europe, whereas Central Eastern European states interpret security as having autonomy and independence from Russia.

Along the same lines, the workshop also found that when the United States and Russia would begin strategic stability negotiations in the near future, the European NATO members should be prepared to advance security aspects that are important to them.

Deterrence

Another key objective for NATO is to consider and arrive at joint decisions on how to maintain a strong deterrence in the event the conflict in Ukraine draws out which is of prime importance in the perception of the Eastern flank countries. Four issues were mentioned as potential weak points or vulnerabilities in the deterrence posture along the Eastern flank:

1. Intelligence sharing and 'perceptions'. The battle groups on the ground must have intelligence shared between them and brought to have the same perception.
2. Coordination between all eight battlegroups on the Eastern flank. There may be an issue of complexity with the battlegroups led by some states, hosted by other states and under different multinational commands
3. The risk of domestic fragmentation between political elites. Elites across the Eastern flank countries hold distinct preferences and views regarding the ends and means of security policy. This in turn has direct bearing upon the resilience of the Western societies.
4. The different threat perceptions and preferences between states. For example, the Black Sea: between the three NATO Member States, Türkiye, Bulgaria and Romania, there is little agreement and unity when it comes to articulating threat perception. This fragmentation of threat perception and respective foreign policy makes both designing and implementing security policy extremely difficult.

The workshop deliberations also discussed deterrence and what kind of deterrence that would in fact deter Russia on the Eastern flank.

Some participants argued that with the new battlegroups and military increase there is a move towards deterrence by denial and that this is not enough to deter Russia. Other participants argued that what NATO is currently displaying is a thickened trip wire rather than deterrence by denial. Participants felt that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has exposed Russian conventional capabilities are rather limited, thereby making deterrence by denial the most adequate option for NATO. This would necessitate NATO developing a complex conventional strategy using enhanced conventional capabilities in Eastern Europe, so as not to rely on nuclear weapons as a primary deterrence instrument.

However, it was also suggested that Eastern European countries do not have the resources to enhance their conventional capabilities, and Western Europe and North American powers are not able both due to economic concerns, threat perception and domestic consideration to move enough conventional capabilities to Eastern Europe.

When discussing deterrence by punishment on the Eastern flank, some participants found it is less likely to be taken seriously by Russia, especially because certain Russian planners and parts of the Russian political elite do not actually

³ This is in line with findings from BASIC roundtable with Russian experts in July 2022, see Gry Thomasen, *Risk Reduction and De-Escalation* (London, United Kingdom: BASIC, 2022).

believe that the United States and its Western partners will go forward and impose the punishment - particularly when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons if Russia engages in aggression against a NATO member state. Russian use of nuclear weapons was in general terms found unlikely, however one participant found it realistic that Russia would use so-called tactical weapons in Ukraine.

Finally, the deterrence discussion also touched upon it often being a binary discussion: for example, either deterrence fails or not. However, some participants came to agree that deterrence should be seen as a nonlinear dynamic process that captures that we are currently in a complex system. In this connection it was also widely discussed whether NATO is currently facing an irrational actor in Moscow. There appeared to be a slight majority believing this is the case.

Sanctions

Participants found that the sanctions imposed on Russia had a limited effect and they argued that sanctions are unlikely to induce Russia to de-escalate or increase Moscow's willingness to engage in dialogue. That being said, the participants also found that non-sanctioning is not an option. It was argued it would isolate Russia by severing all types of communication and be counterproductive to finding common ground from which a solution can be found. This prospect was labelled by some participants as a worst-case scenario.

Transatlantic Relations

While participants found that the EU-NATO strategic partnership is important, the EU's role is solely complementary to what emerged as an all-important 'transatlantic bond'. The United States was considered by all participants as the indispensable partner in preserving security of the Eastern flank countries. The interest in 'deepening the strategic partnership' with the United States and consolidating bilateral defence cooperation is seen as decisive for these states' security. For instance, Romania aims to promote itself as a vector of stability and security in south eastern Europe via bilateral cooperation with the United States. Some participants however found that the United States is not a reliable partner for Europe in particular in the long term.

The End of the Cold War

The workshop also saw a heated debate around the accession of Eastern European countries into NATO in the 1990s and 2000s. Amongst other things, the workshop found that on one hand, that the more the West engages with this debate it fuels the Russian narrative that the West has shown a lack of concern for Russian sensitivities, on the other hand, some participants found that if the Russian narrative flows as an unopposed discourse it would eventually be believed by everyone.

Recommendations

1. NATO member states should reach agreement on under which conditions and requirements relations with Russia can be resumed. There is a need to reach such an agreement in NATO not only between East and West, but also between East and East
2. NATO should reach an understanding of the requirements of NATO deterrence posture along the Eastern flank in the event of a prolonged conflict Ukraine

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