

Clashes of Perceptions

Bridging Perspectives on Security in Europe

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Introduction

There is a clash of perceptions of security in Europe. Bridging these conceptions is therefore necessary for creating a stable and sustainable security architecture in Europe.

Over the past 18 months, BASIC has undertaken in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Phase 2 Applying as Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction that aimed at advancing the understanding of workable options for risk reduction and fostering new relationships between NATO and Russia.

This project was conceived and contemplated prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and was initially intended to map and explore 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 altered the project. Since the invasion, BASIC has not engaged with Russian government officials. We do believe, however, that dialogue remains essential and following the invasion we continued our collaboration with Track 2 Russian experts. In response to the invasion, BASIC also expanded the geographical scope of the project and invited participation from the South-eastern flank countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary) and Sweden and Finland as imminent new members of NATO. The aim of the workshop dialogues also transformed to being more attuned to evolving risk and threat assessments, and less concerned with risk reduction. This was an inevitable development given that war is once again in Eastern Europe.

BASIC has held a total of 4 workshops online and in-person, a roundtable as well as the final Strategic Dialogue in Helsinki, which brought together participants from the project as well as NATO's Western flank countries. BASIC has published 6 reports, including this final report¹. This report presents the main findings of the project and a set of policy recommendations. The views expressed here do not reflect the view of the author.

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The Eastern Flank

Perceptions of Russia

Geopolitics matter on the Eastern flank and needless to say, the North-eastern flank countries' perceptions of Russia are entrenched in the historic experiences. There is a general assumption that Russia is a revisionist power and the invasion in Ukraine has only reinforced this perception². In this understanding, Russian revisionism aims in Europe to regain a sphere of influence on the territory of former Soviet republics while at the same time limiting NATO's ability to defend the Eastern flank countries. This appears to be the root of the current conception of security on the Eastern flank.

When attempting to discuss the future relations with Russia post-conflict, participants mostly considered the discussion premature. However participants were also in agreement that any future relationship with Russia should be based on a cohesive policy agreed to by the entire alliance. While the North-eastern flank in particular recognise there may be significant differences between Eastern and Western conceptions of the future relationship with Russia there is recognition that there are compromises to be struck between NATO members to support and increase alliance cohesion, for instance on the importance of arms control and presumably risk reduction.

As discussed in previous reports, fear of invasion and subjugation appears to be a factor in perceptions of Russia and a fear-based urge to self-protect and defend can magnify insecurity and increase the perceived needs for self-protection measures, including arms build-up and increase of force postures. Thus, once fear is introduced into policy making it becomes increasingly important to separate actual risk from fears to formulate a balanced approach to the adversary³.

¹ Gry Thomasen, *Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank* (London, UK: BASIC, 2022); Gry Thomasen, 'Risks and Risk Reduction: A View from the South-Eastern Flank' (London, UK: BASIC, 2022); Gry Thomasen, 'NATO-Russia Relationship: Perspectives from Russia' (London, UK: BASIC 2022); Gry Thomasen, 'Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction. NATO's North-Eastern Flank Reacts to the War in Ukraine' (London, UK: BASIC, April 2022); Gry Thomasen, 'Risk Reduction and De-Escalation' (London, UK: BASIC, 2022).

² Russian revisionism is a debated concept and without a clear definition. I discuss this in Gry Thomasen, *Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank* (London, UK: BASIC 2022); 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>.

³ Thomasen, *Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank*; 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.

Deterrence

The conceptions of deterrence on the Eastern flank reflect upon this basic assessment of Russia and Russian intentions and aims in Europe. On the North-eastern flank the assessment remained the same after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as it was prior to the invasion. In fact, the invasion reinforced the previously held convictions about national security and the requirements of an enhanced defence posture along the Eastern flank. There was a general agreement amongst participants that post-conflict there can be no return to business as usual with Russia, including a return to the framework of 1994 NATO-Russia Founding Act and the risk reduction instruments created at the 2002 Rome Summit, rather, participants stressed that there is a significant and urgent need to adapt NATO's force posture and strategic aims in the long term. There is agreement among the Eastern flank countries represented at the dialogues that conflict with Russia is not inevitable and the risk of conflict largely depends on if NATO chooses to bolster its deterrence and defence posture.

Thus, there is a general agreement that NATO could initiate certain steps to achieve deterrence by 'conventional' denial, which could, as suggested by some participants, materialise in the form of a bolstered conventional force posture seated on the Eastern flank. This proposed move, from deterrence by nuclear punishment and its reliance on strategic assets as the primary deterrent, has less to do with signalling nuclear resolve, and encapsulated a feeling of the participants that security needs can be met without resort to nuclear use. On one hand, participants also felt that the United States and western allies lack nuclear commitment and are unwilling to follow through with nuclear punishment. In this context, some participants felt that Russia believes this to be the case and has manipulated shared nuclear risks to pursue aggressive opportunities for aggrandisement. In particular, and among the Baltic countries, this project has highlighted the growing concerns around the 'defensibility' of the region and vulnerability to Putin's adventurism.

Participants were acutely aware that pursuit of enhanced conventional deterrence will increase financial commitments, and at a time when the outlook for the global economy is bleak. Moreover, some also felt that the financial obligations would be beyond the current capacity and resources of some states. To preserve alliance solidarity and signal a commitment to adaptation, some suggested that the United States and a coterie of western states should consider financial aid. This would also have the added benefit of enrolling the United States into the defence of the region via bilateral agreements.

Secondly, but not less importantly, there are concerns around deterrence credibility. In this connection there is a widespread concern about alliance cohesion and specifically how an East-West divide on key questions around deterrence and the relationship with Russia should be managed. In an Eastern perception, deterrence requires a strong NATO posture, political resolve and alliance cohesion and crucially only under certain conditions should dialogue with Russia be allowed. The project found that deterrence and collective defence become an all-encompassing concept into which the relationship with Russia should be enrolled. This means that prior to the Russian invasion arms control for instance is viewed as a means to enhance deterrence rather than an avenue for dialogue that may reduce risks.

The invasion of Ukraine has not changed this position fundamentally although the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept is viewed as delivering some reassurance, the Eastern flank countries remain entrenched in the idea that they are frontline states and thus in an ongoing and continued need of more deterrence bolstering.

Risk Reduction

This conception of deterrence as an all-encompassing concept may also be the source of why the Eastern flank countries are sceptical of off-ramps. Offering Russia face saving off-ramps is widely considered by the participants appeasement and a show of weakness rather than a means to end the war in Ukraine. A strong and significantly increased presence of NATO

on the Eastern flank is considered the most effective risk reduction measure, including it being the most effective measure of reducing the risk of nuclear escalation⁴.

Similarly, pursuing risk reduction is considered difficult and potentially futile; as noted by one participant, 'how to do risk reduction with a country that purposely manipulates risk and dislikes transparency?' This belief falls under a broader recognition that risk reduction is becoming increasingly difficult with Russia that has arguably shown that the traditional risk reduction measures are insufficient in dealing with Russia's intentional risk manipulation. This was already identified prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine by our participants from the North-eastern flank countries that discussed Russian risk manipulation and how to manage this without arriving at definitive answers. Interestingly the participants identified how Russia would manipulate risk through nuclear power plants (NPP) by discussing at length the safety of the Astravets NPP on the border of Lithuania and Belarus⁵.

Notwithstanding this set of beliefs, there was also a widespread recognition amongst participants that severing all ties to Russia is incorrect and ultimately futile. The scope and shape of dialogue with Russia was particularly problematic, although all Eastern Flank states agreed that the question remains: what are the requirements for resuming some sort of relations with Russia? In this connection there is a general concern among the Eastern flank countries that NATO must not appease Russia by pursuing dialogue on Russia's premises, rather NATO should formulate a set of requirements that must be met before any dialogue can be attempted. It has been suggested that reviving the risk reduction agenda with Russia requires an end to the war in Ukraine with an accompanying satisfactory peace settlement⁶.

Finally, the project found that there is some apprehension in relation to the strategic dialogue that is bound to resume. Prior to the invasion, Eastern Flank states were apprehensive that the upcoming US Nuclear Posture Review would mark a significant shift in US foreign defence policy by committing the US to a policy of No first Use (NFU). Post Russian invasion of Ukraine, this concern has not dissipated in the sense that there are concerns around whether the New Start treaty will somehow short-change the Eastern flank, or at least, the Eastern flank recognises that strategic stability will not necessarily create stability in Europe. Similarly, there is a concern that as the war in Ukraine may continue for years, and as a result, the Western flank will diminish the support of a strong deterrence posture along the Eastern flank.

Russia

Unlike our work with the Eastern flank countries, our engagement with Russia was exclusively on Track 2 level. This reflects upon our findings as these take the form of skilled expert assessments of how the political leadership in Russia sees international relations and in particular, contemplates Russia's security interests⁷.

The project found, unsurprisingly, that Russia does not consider itself a revisionist power. Rather, in a well-known narrative, Russia believes that it has reacted mostly defensively in response to perceived Western interference in matters that relate to Russian security interests. This project has concluded that there is a major clash of interpretations on both sides concerning the evolution of the post-Cold War order where Russia mainly views NATO enlargement as a militarisation of what started out as a political crisis around joint decision-making in Europe⁸.

⁴ Gry Thomasen, 'Risks and Risk Reduction: A View from the South-Eastern Flank' (London, UK: BASIC 2022); Strategic Dialogue in Helsinki, October 2022.

⁵ Thomasen, *Applying a Systematic Approach to NATO-Russia Risk Reduction: Perspectives from the North East Flank*, Heather Williams, 'What We Got Wrong about Nuclear Risk Reduction', *The Hill*, 23 May 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3497843-what-we-got-wrong-about-nuclear-risk-reduction/>

⁶ Statement from track 2 participant at Strategic Dialogue in Helsinki, October 2022.

⁷ In this report Russia is the same as the political leadership in the Kremlin.

⁸ Thomasen, 'NATO-Russia Relationship: Perspectives from Russia'.

Secondly the project has also found that Russia remains vested in the idea that capabilities are more important than political declarations as markers of other states' or alliances' intentions. Capabilities are considered a reliable indicator of abilities and intentions in determining the actual challenge to Russian security which in turn make the spread of offensive military systems to the territories and to the countries adjacent to Russia problematic.

The project also found that there is a matter of status and prestige. Russia considers its participation in international institutions a means to secure Russian status in the international system. The Russian seat at the UN Security Council is the most important indicator of this. However, the ability to work within these institutions appears to be quite the challenge to Russian diplomacy. In general terms the Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs have lost terrain internally to the Ministry of Defence which may explain a lack of diplomatic skill⁹.

The Russian quest for status in the international system is an issue that BASIC has highlighted in a previous report. In general terms it is important to be able to distinguish between status and security seeking behaviour. If for instance, status is more important than security, traditional means of solving the security dilemma, such as arms control, will not lead to a change in – in this case, Russian foreign policy. Thus, when managing NATO's relationship with Russia post conflict the ability to discern the drivers of Russian foreign and security policy is of paramount importance to build a sustainable relationship.

Nuclear Signalling

Two of the main findings from the workshops involving the NATO member states and the Strategic Dialogue are, first, that Russian intentions and short- and long-term strategic interests in Europe are unclear to NATO member-states and they find them extremely difficult to identify given the information available to them. Second, as a result of the first the states face an information and signalling problem: they are unable to discern Russian signals and intentions and estimating nuclear risks is difficult. This creates a highly-dangerous and volatile situation that can lead to further escalation.

As such, when discussing nuclear risks in Europe at our Strategic Dialogue, it was evident that Russia is the main source of nuclear risk in Europe currently. The risk of a radiological incident at the Zaporizhzhya NPP was identified as urgent. However, when discussing Russian use of low-yield nuclear weapons in Ukraine, discerning Russian nuclear signalling is crucial. NATO needs communication strategies involving an informed awareness of how the Russian leadership will interpret diplomatic signals.

Our discussions at the Strategic Dialogue also found that Russian nuclear signalling is at times intended for the benefit of domestic conservative circles. There are conservative circles within Russia that are supportive of nuclear weapons use as well as circles that are against it, and Putin is not independent from either grouping. This spills over into nuclear signalling that at times is targeted to these hawkish domestic circles, which in turn, raises the question: whom to listen to in Russia to understand Russian nuclear signalling if it is primarily domestically focused? A few participants suggested that states could consider sending a Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to send an explanation of each action, rather than just listen to Putin and other Kremlin spokespeople.

In this context, it was highlighted that although Russia's exact aims in Ukraine may be unclear, one of the Russian goals of the war is to consolidate the regime and the assessment is that a nuclear exchange with the West would clearly not support the regime's consolidation and survivability.

⁹ Gry Thomasen, 'NATO-Russia Relationship: Perspectives from Russia' (London, UK: BASIC 2022); Olivier Schmitt, 'How to Challenge an International Order: Russian Diplomatic Practices in Multilateral Security Organisations', *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 3 (September 2020): 922–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119886024>; Elias Götz, 'Status Matters in World Politics', *International Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (4 March 2021): 228–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa046>.

On this basis, it was cautioned that states should be wary of alarmist rhetoric which was discussed earlier as well with Russian experts that warned against 'verbal inflation' as a source of risk escalation in itself¹⁰.

Risk Reduction

When discussing risk reduction in Europe, this project has found a majority that considers a reinforced and forward conventional deterrence the only, or at least most valuable risk reduction measure based on the perception that Russia is not trustworthy.

However, at our Strategic Dialogue in Helsinki it emerged that while it may be tempting to claim risk reduction is not applicable in the current environment, the value of strategic risk reduction remains the same. It was argued that the very core of risk reduction is about preventing nuclear weapons use through hotlines, safety and security measures initially to ensure the credibility of the deterrence and minimise the risk of nuclear use by accident. As such, risk reduction serves as a tool for decision makers being able to discern between situations where escalation is intentional or accidental. Furthermore, it is important to consider that escalation management is a part of deterrence and that intentional escalation is a part of conflict. Grounded in this context, escalation management in conflict requires a framework and secondly that escalation management is useful for all antagonists which makes risk reduction useful for manipulation in conflict.

Conclusions

This project has found that there are different conceptions of security currently existing in Europe, which has created a set of difficult political problems to reconcile. It remains crucial that NATO comes to a joint position on the conception of deterrence needs and the value of risk reduction.

While NATO should embark upon a process aimed at reaching a joint position on these key questions around deterrence, risk reduction and the future management of Russia, there is also an imminent need to recognise how conflictual Russia's conception of security is to in particular the Eastern flank's conception.

Regardless of the interpretation of the historical process surrounding the initial settlement of Europe after the end of the Cold War, the conflictual conception should form the basis of discerning Russia's strategic interests and intentions in Europe.

¹⁰ Thomasen, 'Risk Reduction and De-Escalation'.

Policy Recommendations

NATO should embark upon a process to reconcile different positions on mainly three key issues:

- Deterrence posture now and in a future, including in the case of a prolonged conflict in Ukraine
- The utility of risk reduction measures, including in conflict as a escalation management tool
- Clarify the requirements for resuming some sort of relations with Russia as well as identifying the form of the future management of Russia

Discerning Russian intentions and strategic aims in Europe should be made a priority among NATO member states, including:

- Identifying the prominence of status vs security as a driver in Russian policies
- Identifying Russian perceptions of security
- Developing communication strategies to ensure Russian diplomacy correctly deciphers NATO's signalling

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