

Rethinking European Security: Istanbul Workshop Report

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Introduction

In February 2025 BASIC hosted a track 1.5 workshop in Istanbul, Türkiye, to discuss the present and future of European security. The workshop was the fourth of five regional workshops organised in fulfilment of the aims of the 'Turning Point: Realising a Sustainable Security Architecture for Europe' project, referred to as 'Rethinking European Security'.

This project is driven by the need to address increasing multipolarity that has resulted in military conflicts and a breakdown of the international rules-based order. This trend rapidly accelerated with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which highlighted the collapse of post-Cold War diplomacy and the need for a new security architecture. New agendas and directives are needed to lessen current and future security risks, most importantly regarding climate change and its impacts on security. This project seeks to generate a sustainable security systems change in Europe and beyond.¹

The workshop in Istanbul was held under Chatham House Rule and was attended by official representatives and non-governmental experts from Türkiye, Ukraine, Belarus, Romania, Moldova, and Bulgaria. BASIC gives thanks to participants for their active engagement in workshop discussions, with the main findings detailed in this report.

¹ A working paper produced by BASIC was distributed to attendees to provide background information on these subjects, thereby allowing for informed discussion.

Main Findings

Shifts in US foreign policy and the future of Ukraine

The workshop reflected upon the recent change in American grand strategy. As one participant reflected, since 1945, the US's foreign policy strategy has been to co-opt other nations when possible and to compel them into America's hegemonic order when necessary.² Trump's present and previous administrations have sought to reverse this strategy, now using 'compellence when possible [and] co-optation when necessary'. The same participant asserted that compellence long-term is a more costly strategy to uphold international order (which the collapse of the Soviet Union testified to). Participants agreed that the US's shift in strategy entails geopolitically withdrawing from Europe and, as a result, a widening transatlantic divide. The workshop asserted that the second Trump administration does not view Europe as a strategic ally and predicted that this would lead Europe to be a passive entity and vulnerable to external influence or attack.

Many participants were concerned about the US's shift in outlook due to the fear that it would militarily abandon, or weaken its support for, Ukraine. These participants warned of the resulting consequences that would be felt by Ukraine and Europe more broadly. Multiple participants contended that if Ukraine were to surrender or be defeated, it would be the end of the international rules-based order that has kept Europe at peace since the end of the Cold War.³ They argued that Russia cannot be appeased and would continue to challenge the legitimacy and existence of smaller non-NATO states; other state and non-state actors would, in turn, be emboldened to achieve their goals through force. Furthermore, participants pointed to the impossibility of lasting peace without Ukrainian society and the government's involvement in peace negotiations.

Other participants – in particular, those from Türkiye – were less concerned with the prospect of a defeated Ukraine. This is because these participants viewed Russia emerging as the victor in this war as a foregone conclusion. This perspective views the West's pledge to give uncompromising support as unrealistic. These participants gave credence to Russia's concerns of NATO's eastern expansion. They also placed partial blame on Europe and the West for the failure to have reached a sustainable peace settlement. These participants asserted that Türkiye's history of relations with Russia has led them to take Putin's threats seriously, whereas they argued that Western arrogance and failure to learn from mistakes has prevented Europe from dealing with Russia with the same success. It seemed that the workshop participants from Türkiye came to different conclusions about Russia's intentions and actions than the rest of the workshop participants.

The workshop agreed that the shift in US security guarantees for Europe is uncertain and continuously developing. Participants attributed this to the fracturing and different schools of thought within MAGA. One participant divided MAGA into three main camps: (i) international-traditionalist with the belief that the US security approach should be to operate in Europe and Asia simultaneously (associated with Secretary of State Marco Rubio); (ii) Indo-Pacific-focused, which stipulates that the US must limit troops in Europe and the Middle East so that it may prioritise the challenge of China

² This participant defined co-optation as providing quasi-public goods to states in exchange for acquiescence to American hegemony. Washington is no longer willing to provide such goods, which limits its ability to co-opt.

³ In fact, Europe has faced other conflicts and invasions in recent years. Participants pointed to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. In addition, the Second Chechen War took place from 1999 to 2009. The Yugoslav Wars occurred between 1991 and 2001.

(associated with Undersecretary of Defence Elbridge Colby); (iii) isolationism, which calls for the complete withdrawal of the US from abroad and its influence limited to the Western hemisphere. The workshop surmised that those who prioritise US operations in the Indo-Pacific – known as ‘the prioritisers’ – are most dominant in Washington today. Participants agreed that to reverse the prioritisers’ prevalence, European actors must support the internationalist-traditionalist camp by showing increased commitment to transatlantic security and defence.⁴

Participants discussed why a US presence in Europe has been so critical and how the continent might respond in the case of a US withdrawal.⁵ The workshop considered how a US military presence in Europe provides credibility to European deterrence, as the US effectively applies political pressure to Europe. This pressure forces Europe to collaborate, and the US provides logistical support and intelligence to them, particularly in the domain of military operations. In response, participants predicted that European partners – particularly those in NATO – will have to increase their defence spending and conventional deterrence through autonomous capabilities. Participants agreed that it will be difficult to ramp up European defence production in the short-term. They also agreed that there would be no immediate way to force European leadership to work together in the absence of strong leaders, although the UK and Türkiye were cited as possible unifiers. The workshop hoped that the US would not suspend its logistical support and intelligence to Europe, however, because this gap would be difficult to fill.

Participants considered the closer partnerships that could be developed with Ukraine, in part, due to a less present US in Europe. The workshop agreed that Ukraine is a litmus test to the uncertainties that Europe is facing. It was recognised that Ukraine’s defence sector produces one-third of its battlefield weapons through domestic innovations. Participants advocated for Europe to have joint production lines with Ukraine, especially as Ukraine has plans to scale-up its high-tech development industries and technologies. Furthermore, workshop attendees argued for better integration of Ukrainian companies into European defence planning.

Not optimistic about the future of arms control but there are still some positive ways forward

The workshop assessed the current arms control, risk reduction, and disarmament landscape and found that the present mechanisms are not robust. Participants asserted that agreements, such as the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), the Vienna Document, the Treaty on Open Skies, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty have become defunct – either officially or in practice – and are unlikely to be resurrected. Participants reflected that New START is the only remaining arms control treaty, although Russia suspended it in 2023 and the geopolitical situation around it remains tense due to Russia’s war on Ukraine. Participants perceived Russia as viewing its strategic stability as being tied to Ukraine and its sphere of influence; therefore, they argued that risk reduction mechanisms are likely to be rejected by Russia unless the US alters its support for Ukraine or a mutually acceptable settlement of Russia’s war on Ukraine could be reached.

⁴ Other participants viewed division in MAGA as being between ‘America First Nationalists’, who seek to dismantle world order whilst making the US dominant on the world stage, and Tech Oligarchs, who seek to dismantle world order and the American state, while pushing the supremacy of big tech corporations. From this perspective, there is a role for Europe to play in countering the global destruction caused by both Russia and Trump.

⁵ Participants conceded that a US military withdrawal from Europe will likely be in its conventional capabilities; the US would likely leave its nuclear power intact.

Not only has Russia declined to participate in risk reduction, according to participants, but it has escalated tensions since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Some participants cited reports of Russia developing anti-space nuclear tools and monitoring its deployment of intermediate missiles with nuclear warheads. Other participants noted Russia's use of nuclear rhetoric to try to deter support for Ukraine, as well as its stationing of nuclear weapons in Belarus. Some participants asserted that the NATO-Russia Founding Act from 1997 - where it is stated that NATO has no plan or intention to deploy nuclear weapons to the territories of new NATO member states - unnecessarily ties the hands of NATO members, preventing them from countering these actions by Russia.

Similarly, the workshop raised concerns about China building up its nuclear arsenal and its unwillingness to enter into arms control or risk reduction dialogues before it has matched similar levels of nuclear weapons held by Russia and the US. Therefore, the workshop concluded that there is no meaningful role for China in disarmament, risk reduction, or arms control negotiations at this time.

Apart from China and Russia's hesitancy to engage in disarmament and arms control measures, the US's withdrawal from Europe – as discussed in this report's previous section – raises the prospect of nuclear build-up in Europe, according to participants. The workshop reasoned that, up until now, NATO's extended deterrence acted as a substitute for European states holding their own national nuclear weapons. With the US less present in Europe, some participants speculated that individual European states may seek to develop their own nuclear weapons capabilities, although they disagreed on the level of probability that this would occur.

Other participants speculated that the UK and France may seek to extend their nuclear umbrellas to elsewhere in Europe. Workshop attendees argued that these trajectories would be more likely if Russia were to take vast amounts of Ukrainian territory at the conclusion of the war. Even if these occurrences were not to take place, participants shared that countries like Poland, Germany, Italy, and France have *already* begun to develop their own missile launch systems to deter Russia. Arms build-up would be unlikely to slow down in the near-term, especially if the US and Russia seriously attempt to impose a peace deal that Europe – not least, Ukraine – has not been a part of negotiating.

The workshop suggested that humanitarian considerations should play a larger role in arms control, risk reduction, and disarmament measures. Participants believed that, at present, states have prioritised maintaining the balance of power over the vulnerability of human lives. One participant differentiated arms control as being based on the idea of keeping deterrence optimal from the focus of disarmament, which is on the preservation of human life. The workshop rationalised that the clash between realist and liberal models – or between deterrence and disarmament, respectively – must find a way to reduce stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Indeed, participants mentioned that the US and Russia could lead the way in global disarmament and arms control as Trump has signalled a desire to decrease spending on nuclear weapons build-up and upkeep. These aspirations appeared to be long-term, however, because participants observed that Europe's current attempts to bolster its defences with previously taboo weapons like landmines and cluster munitions will lead to civilian casualties.

It was suggested that there are some measures that could be considered in the long- and short-terms to implement some arms control, risk reduction, and disarmament measures. In the short-term, participants suggested that behavioural arms control, or a code of conduct for regulating behaviours, could be had between states, or there could be engagement

through dialogue and the opening of (more) hotlines. In the long-term, participants speculated that a New START successor could be developed that caps tactical nuclear warheads and limits strategic offensive weapons. Further, workshop attendees suggested that existing confidence-building measures could be regularised with expanding notifications for military exercises and the establishment of aerial surveillance mechanisms. It was suggested that any arms control framework should be more comprehensive and encapsulate emerging technologies including cyber, hypersonic, and space-based. However, it seemed from discussions that there are currently more risks than solutions in relation to arms control in Europe. For the foreseeable future, participants agreed that European security may best be characterised by the absence of arms control.

More institutional focus must be placed on the risks and impacts of hybrid threats

The workshop pointed to the importance of tackling hybrid threats that have proliferated in recent years, especially those perpetrated by Russia. These attacks, in part, are related to the integrity of physical infrastructure. In particular, energy security is of relevance, as energy is consistently used as a weapon. Participants gave the example of Russia withholding gas supplies to Transnistria in Moldova to try to influence its domestic politics. Some participants argued that the West is in an all-out energy war already, with the West using energy as a weapon as well, such as through the West imposing sanctions on Russian oil in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

There was a universal hope expressed that energy would be taken out of war, but it was also acknowledged by some that energy will continue to be part of great-power confrontations, and that energy self-sufficiency is necessary to reduce vulnerability to hybrid threats. Participants recognised that after the imposition of sanctions on Russia in 2022, for instance, Europe pays five times more for natural gas than the United States, which, moreover, has become the number one producer of oil in the world.⁶ In another instance, it was acknowledged that Türkiye has chosen to collaborate with Rosatom as a partner for its nuclear energy, much to the dismay of other European countries. It was pointed out by one participant, however, that, amongst all the potential partners approached, Rosatom was the only company willing to put money and effort behind this endeavour.

There has been evidence that Russia has also damaged European infrastructure by severing sea cables and committing acts of sabotage through its shadow fleet.⁷ The cables that have been cut are along the Baltic and North Seas. Participants also cited rumours that tankers were damaged by 'unattributed' explosions in the Mediterranean and Black Seas with the implication that they were detonated by Russia. Participants asserted that these actions have been escalatory yet, given their covert nature, operate below the threshold of triggering NATO's Article 5. As such, participants emphasised the importance of keeping up the enforcement of sanctions on shadow fleets.

The workshop extended its discussion of arms control and confidence-building to hybrid threats. Participants questioned if it would be possible to apply arms control frameworks to hybrid threats. The workshop came to the consensus that it would be difficult to impose these frameworks because hybrid threats are difficult to define, with some interpreting hybrid threats as encompassing everything that is not considered military threats. One participant speculated that hybrid threats

⁶ European Commission, *The Future of European Competitiveness*.

⁷ For more information on Russia's shadow fleet, see Brooks and Harris, 'Where Did Russia's Shadow Fleet Come from?'

could be tackled through these frameworks only after a renegotiation of traditional arms control treaties and confidence-building measures are realised.

The importance of addressing cyber attacks and disinformation was also discussed at length. These types of hybrid attacks have been predominantly perpetrated by Russia as a means to penetrate the psyche of European society, according to participants. The workshop argued that Russia seeks to lower the West's risk perception through a multi-pronged strategy including cultural diplomacy, strategic narrative, and controlled opposition figures with the ultimate goal of having sanctions lifted. Examples of Russian disinformation that were listed included the use of bots that have influenced military action with sensitive areas like radiology and nuclear security. Another example given was Russian disinformation stating that Ukraine has the technology to create nuclear weapons. However, Russia's interference in elections raised the most concern amongst participants.

Participants reflected that Russian disinformation has targeted elections in European countries including Germany, Romania, Moldova, and Georgia in recent years. It was agreed amongst workshop participants that governments must learn from the experiences – and the resilience displayed – by these countries. The workshop recommended that the election mechanisms and strategies should be adapted in EU countries to account for this interference. As Russia improves their election interference tactics – such as through illicit funding mechanisms, the proliferation of bots, and marketing campaigns – Europe should bolster their observation and monitoring tools and prepare the public through enhancing historical and cultural resistance to Russian narratives. Similarly, participants asserted that Ukraine should not be pressured to hold elections before a sustainable deal is negotiated, regardless of US and Russian messaging.⁸ Participants agreed that tackling disinformation would have to be a pillar of a new European security architecture.⁹

Although there is strategic fragmentation within Europe, a new security architecture will not develop a new institutional framework but rather adapt the existing ones

Participants debated how to implement and institutionalise a new European security architecture. They recognised that there is great potential for alliance fragmentation throughout Europe, as there is little unity and 'strategic hedging' amongst states. Participants reflected that European states have incompatible security perceptions. For example, Central and Eastern Europe seek security from Russia; simultaneously, other European states have shown an openness to develop a security architecture that includes Russia. Similarly, participants pointed to Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye having different visions of security in the Black Sea. They predicted that if Türkiye cooperates with Russia on nuclear energy development, there could be pushback from the EU states who will seek to deter Russia even after a ceasefire with Ukraine. Additionally, it was questioned how much Western Europe would invest in defence funding and production when, geographically, it is further from the frontline and therefore might feel less urgency to prepare for a conflict with Russia. This is problematic because a consensus, or large majorities, are needed to pass resolutions at institutions such as the UN and conclusions at the European Council.

⁸ Besides, the Constitution of Ukraine does not allow elections during martial law.

⁹ One participant branded disinformation as its own category of security called 'information security'.

The workshop concluded that it is necessary to consider pathways for overcoming deep divides and to support each other to ensure a common resilience in a multitude of strategic domains. Participants called for a need for internal balancing with investment in defence and industrial cooperation and diversification in strategic partnerships beyond Europe and the West, including closer partnerships with Türkiye. They reflected that the EU was founded on the principles of compromise and the importance of gathering votes of all member states, which could be the basis for a new security architecture that considers diverse challenges and threats. The workshop agreed that without unity, Europe could find itself irrelevant as a strategic entity on the world stage.

It was also recommended that there would *not* be a need for a new institution to be created to host a new European security architecture. As one participant reflected, whenever a new institution is created in Europe, it can take an endless amount of time to develop and build; rather, it would be better to 'adapt existing institutions to the new era' to save on time and resources. It was argued that adapting current institutions would require flexibility and swift engagement with regional allies with the example of Moldova given, which has recently sought to orient itself towards Türkiye, when it has frequently aligned itself to the EU and Western world. Furthermore, participants did not believe that the European public would support increased spending on new institutions.

Instead, the workshop concluded that institutions should be reformed, given the crisis in regional and global security, particularly for institutions that are mandated to build peace, as these institutions have not given security guarantees to vulnerable states and populations. The example of Armenia and Azerbaijan was given, where – at the time of the workshop – they are not actively fighting, yet there is no peace either; institutions such as the UN have not been successful in facilitating lasting peace. Participants reflected that if entities like the UN could be reformed to secure safety for all, this would have to be on a global-level, informed by the regional-level. As such, the workshop concluded that European security cannot be looked at in a vacuum when it depends upon events and actions taken all over the world.

Beyond the UN, participants were critical of the OSCE and the EU, calling for their reform as well. Workshop participants with backgrounds in arms control and disarmament asserted that the decline of multilateralism has diminished the influence of the OSCE, which has historically been crucial to the creation and implementation of arms control and risk reduction initiatives. The workshop discussed the positive contributions that the OSCE has made, including its mediation work. It was suggested that the OSCE could be reformed to be swifter and more localised with the ability to make implementable decisions; for example, the OSCE's work in Transnistria and Central Eastern European countries was lauded. However, it was noted that all-inclusive institutions like the OSCE would be unlikely to ever have the capacity to provide military deterrence – an important element to a new European security architecture where the use of force has again become a means to conduct foreign policy – as it is unlikely that these institutions would facilitate better security partnerships or produce weapons.

The workshop made critiques of the EU as an effective institution, namely due to its exclusionary nature. Some participants expressed regret that the EU has not included Türkiye as a member state or in EU defence collaboration (such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation and the European Defence Fund), even though Türkiye has consistently been a part of European security. Türkiye has presented itself as safeguarding Europe against mass migration and instability from the Greater Middle East; it has also closed the Bosphorus Strait since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While participants recognised that there is discussion within the EU for enlargement to incorporate new members such as Ukraine and Moldova, the Union must also include a broader spectrum of countries in number and in diversity, such as those in the Western Balkans; otherwise, participants argued, the EU could lose its credibility. Furthermore, it was raised that some European states are not members of the EU by choice, such as the UK. It is for these reasons that some

workshop participants argued that it would be more effective for non-EU European allies to be able to participate in planning, preparation, and formation of operations and peacekeeping without exclusion.

Some participants advocated for a new European security architecture to be comprised of a balance of power maintained and enforced by NATO and the EU, not least through ensuring adequate defence spending. These participants advocated for a division of responsibilities, with the US countering China's might and European NATO states having ownership of European security. All participants recognised, however, that European states would have to invest billions to build self-sustaining capabilities. The workshop discussed the leadership crisis amongst EU member states where there is, what participants perceived to be, a short-sighted cost-benefit calculation that hinders long-term solutions. They asserted that a long-term strategy and economic investment are necessary for the EU to become a security and foreign policy actor, which some participants argued would be necessary for the EU to stay relevant.

Outside of already-existing and new institutions, some participants suggested that it may be desirable for a new European security architecture to operate through informal alliances. Examples of 'alliances within alliances' – or 'informal security groups that operate outside of the formal treaties' – were suggested as informal ways forward, such as the Bucharest Nine and Weimar Triangle. It was suggested that while these alliances cannot replace NATO as a defence institution, they could offer speed, agility, and flexibility. Participants speculated that informal alliances could provide a defence backup to support Europe's deterrence and collective security.

Participants also discussed the role of civil society and the fight against disinformation in the European security architecture. The difference between Romania and Moldova in terms of resilience to Russian influence, despite being culturally very similar countries, testifies to the importance of disinformation campaigns, including a civil society that can foster awareness and improve media literacy. Participants also noted that the terms 'countering disinformation' and 'civil society' recently have been attacked for being applied selectively to silence views dissenting from the mainstream. To the extent this holds true, it is important that civil society organisations return to what they originally intended: rather than analytical and driven by governments' demand for reports, they need to rediscover their 'guerrilla-like' nature and become more critical of those holding power in and across countries.

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