



## STATEMENT BY THE EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY LEADERSHIP GROUP (EASLG)

# Support for Crisis Management Dialogue and Strategic Stability in the Euro-Atlantic Region

**T**oday, the United States, NATO, and Russia continue to severely curtail dialogue on crisis management in the Euro-Atlantic region, depriving ourselves of an essential tool to prevent an incident from turning into unimaginable catastrophe. The lack of effective and reliable crisis management dialogue and tools sharpens mistrust and undercuts progress on broader issues, including the implementation of the Minsk II agreement, Ukraine, and the US/NATO-Russia relationship.

The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) has met only eleven times in carefully orchestrated sessions since 2014. Engagement below the level of NATO Ambassadors has been blocked, lacking political will to reengage. Routine exchanges between military professionals who can describe and explain various day-to-day activities relating to military forces and their activities in the region are not taking place within the NRC or elsewhere to the extent they could and should be. The capacity to engage on crisis management, in the absence of being used, is diminishing.

The risks of mutual misunderstandings and unintended signals that stem from an absence of dialogue relating to crisis management leading to a dangerous escalation are real, beginning on one end of the spectrum with the possibility of a conventional military incident leading to conventional war, and on the other end of the scale the potential for nuclear threats, or even nuclear use, where millions could be killed in minutes.

What should be a sobering reality for all nations in the Euro-Atlantic region is that escalation may happen very quickly, as was seen in the case of the downing of a Russian aircraft by Turkey in November 2015—the first time a NATO ally has fired on a Russian aircraft. Escalation is also more likely when leaders incorrectly assume their actions will be interpreted as intended, or that their actions—and any resulting military interactions—can be carefully calibrated and controlled.

The risk of any one incident or set of circumstances leading to escalation is greatly exacerbated by new hybrid threats, such as cyber risks to early warning and command and control systems. Cyber threats can emerge at any point during a crisis and trigger misunderstandings and unintended signals—magnified by the difficulties in attribution and real-time attack assessment—that could precipitate war.

All of these risks are greater against a backdrop of unease and uncertainty in much of the Euro-Atlantic region resulting

*For the past four years, Des Browne, Wolfgang Ischinger, Igor Ivanov, Sam Nunn, and their respective organizations—the European Leadership Network (ELN), the Munich Security Conference (MSC), the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), and the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI)—have been working with former and current officials and experts from a group of Euro-Atlantic states and the European Union to test ideas and develop proposals for improving security in areas of existential common interest. The EASLG operates as an independent and informal initiative, with participants who reflect the diversity of the Euro-Atlantic region from the United States, Canada, Russia, and 15 European countries.*

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from the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, as well as migration, Brexit, new technologies, new and untested leaders in many Euro-Atlantic states, increasing challenges to multilateral mechanisms and solutions, an erosion of faith in cooperative security, and publics who are not sufficiently motivated or able to pressure their leaders to change course.

Finally, there is a clear connection between crisis prevention and crisis management dialogue on one end of the Euro-Atlantic security continuum, and strategic stability dialogue, which is a longer-term, dynamic process between Russia and the West involving numerous variables and factors. The absence of dialogue—in particular, crisis management dialogue intended to avoid or resolve incidents that could breed escalation—severely undercuts the sustained communication essential for reaching mutual understandings on and maintaining strategic stability. Simply stated, we cannot have strategic stability without dialogue.

## **RENEWING AND DEEPENING CRISIS MANAGEMENT DIALOGUE: AN ESSENTIAL STEP FOR STRATEGIC STABILITY**

The challenge to the United States, NATO, and Russia is clear, and the answer compelling: Nations must begin the process of rebuilding trust so that it will again be possible to address major security challenges in the Euro-Atlantic region—as was done throughout the Cold War, and must be done today. **The current stalemate in crisis management dialogue is in no nation's or organization's interest.** Crisis management dialogue was an essential tool throughout the Cold War—used for the day-to-day managing of potentially dangerous military activities, not for sending political signals. Leaders should not deprive themselves of this essential tool today.

This process could begin with a **direction by leaders to their respective governments to renew dialogue on crisis**

**management**—both bilateral and multilateral—especially in absence of trust. With respect to multilateral dialogue, ideally this could take place within the NRC, or as a separate working group. In either case, the mandate would be focused on addressing concerns generated by day-to-day military events and activities, not political or strategic issues.

**Greater automaticity** in the context of renewed dialogue on crisis management could play a useful role in renewing trust and building confidence. It would also be important to **strengthen the diplomatic tissue** that surrounds a renewed dialogue on crisis management, including the appointment of ambassadors to relevant organizations and staffing in relevant missions. The communication hot-line between SHAPE and the Russian General Staff should be used, especially in the early stages of a crisis. Efforts to **raise awareness** of the importance of renewing crisis management dialogue should continue at both the **political level and with publics**. This includes providing a compelling rationale for “why” political leaders should engage now with this issue.

**The goal of crisis management should be to avoid a crisis of any magnitude.** Failing that, crisis management can play an essential role in reducing the risks that any one incident or set of circumstances—exacerbated by misunderstandings or unintended signals—triggers a wider conventional conflict, or ever reaches the point where the use of nuclear weapons might be signaled, let alone considered, by leaders with perhaps only minutes to make such a fateful choice.

To provide further insurance on the nuclear side of the crisis spectrum, steps can and should be taken to (a) address cyber threats to early warning and command and control systems—including **developing clear “rules of the road” in the nuclear cyber world**—and (b) increase **leadership decision time**. On both sides, steps to increase decision time could include investments in better understanding NATO and Russian activity, exercises in crisis management, and investments to provide better indications and warning.

In framing crisis management dialogue and examining options for making it more effective, a **conceptually based division** (that is, crisis management dialogue being short-notice, high-pressure crisis management) rather than a capabilities-based division (conventional forces, non-traditional/prompt-strike forces, nuclear forces, cyber and missile defense) **has greater merit.**

## **CRISIS MANAGEMENT DISTINGUISHED FROM, BUT ESSENTIAL FOR, STRATEGIC STABILITY**

There is also merit in distinguishing crisis management dialogue from strategic stability dialogue, with strategic stability dialogue focusing on slow-burn, peacetime management of evolving strategic relationships, including broader issues and trends (e.g., the role of emerging technology). In many respects, **crisis management dialogue is focused on keeping the Euro-Atlantic region safe enough to have the prolonged engagement necessary for a successful strategic stability dialogue.**

Recognizing that restoring mechanisms for crisis prevention and management is an essential prerequisite for strategic stability, nations in the Euro-Atlantic region should be engaged now in discussing a broader framework for strategic stability. They should seek to identify their visions for a more stable Euro-Atlantic security architecture in the next 5–10 years, and identify the tools and policy initiatives necessary to get there—with the goal of rebuilding mutual security in the Euro-Atlantic region.

## **AREAS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION ON CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

The EASLG will continue to provide a foundation for crisis management advocacy, analysis of steps, and bringing together nongovernmental and governmental, and civilian and military, participants. **Recommended areas of examination in 2019 include:**

- 1. Examine areas of bilateral and multilateral crisis management that are in use today.** For example, **Latvia and Russia** recently concluded the process of demarcation of the state border, and **Latvia and Belarus** concluded a bilateral agreement to exchange information on military flights near their border. **Turkey and Russia** are now conducting joint patrols in Idlib province. **Open Skies flights** are expected to resume with a regular program in 2019. Also deserving of examination is the work of the **Baltic Sea Project Team** under the auspices of the International Civil Aviation Organization. There are new forums outside of traditional avenues for engagement, such as the **Riga Dialogue** and the **EASLG's Crisis Management Dialogue Working Group.**
- 2. Examine the “gaps” and their associated risks in the Vienna Document**—and how these gaps can be filled, and the risks reduced.
- 3. Examine the potential for the OSCE's Structured Dialogue** and whether the work of the EASLG's Crisis Management Dialogue Working Group can in any way help catalyze or contribute to work in this channel (e.g., focusing on specific measures that can make each side less concerned about the other side's activities and exercises).

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