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Mistakes, misunderstandings and miscalculation: Reducing the risk of NATO/Russia military incidents and escalation

Key themes and recommendations
from an ELN/LIIA NATO-Russia
round table discussion

4 June 2021

The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European network of nearly 300 past, present and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.

The Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA) is the oldest Latvian think tank, providing analysis on international developments, regional security and foreign policy.

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A group of experts from Europe, Russia, and the United States held some 20 online seminars on NATO–Russia risk reduction in the summer and autumn of 2020 and offered several ideas in a [document that was signed by 166 distinguished Americans, Europeans, and Russians](#). Within the document it was suggested that *“As part of the NATO 2030 reflection process, Russia and NATO member states should analyse relations between NATO and Russia with a view to developing the military-to-military dialogue”*.

Ahead of the NATO and Biden-Putin Summits, the European Leadership Network (ELN) and Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA) convened forty senior military and civilian experts from Russia and NATO countries to progress the discussion on NATO/Russia military-to-military dialogue. They considered: *“How could senior NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue produce practical and pragmatic measures to increase predictability and reduce the risk of military incidents at sea, in the air and on land escalating to the level of military conflict?”*

The output of the round table can broadly be grouped into three areas: *Exploring the risk*, proposing *Pragmatic ways ahead*, and *Priority areas to be addressed*.

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Exploring the risk

NATO and Russian forces are frequently in close contact in the air, on sea and on land across the Euro-Atlantic region, and mistrust is at a high point. There are a variety of different sources of potential military clashes, including a lack of military control or discipline, or the military being used as a tool of purposeful intimidation out of fear or from a perceived position of power. Armies know from experience that hazardous incidents are most likely to occur when communication channels and crisis control plans are weakest. Today, risks are multiplied by a variety of rapidly evolving new technologies and by the potential for disinformation and third-party spoofing. Planning needs to take account of the worst-case scenario and not assume that commanders on the ground will always be able to de-escalate.

It is necessary to reformulate the prevailing “no business as usual” stance which led to the cessation of all dialogue, into a position where discussions about risk reduction are possible. All parties would need to accept that this will not resolve core political issues but may preserve time for them to be addressed. Dialogue should not be used as a weapon in this argument, but rather to manage and perhaps eventually reduce and resolve increased tension.

Pragmatic ways ahead

NATO’s official position is to combine strong defence and strong deterrence with openness to dialogue, but in practice this dialogue, for a variety of reasons, has ground to an almost complete standstill. There are misleading and counterproductive misperceptions that talking is a sign of weakness, or a reward to an adversary. This view deprives NATO of vital diplomatic tools to pursue its political and security objectives and hands the initiative to adversaries. Mil/Mil dialogue is a low-risk approach. Dialogue stabilises the military environment and reaps the mutual benefits of avoiding unnecessary escalation due to miscalculation and miscommunication.

To formulate a practical and viable path to risk reduction dialogue, officials should build on what already exists and what works. Practical, concrete measures are the most likely to make progress. Crisis communication mechanisms should be implemented as operational directives rather than national policy or formal agreements between nations. In addition, existing instruments and formal agreements (such as INCSEA agreements, Vienna document, OST) should be emphasised, utilised, preserved and extended. NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue must be directed by political process, but once political guidance is given, it falls to military practitioners to provide solutions.

The group proposed options for a realistic restoration of military-to-military contact, which should start with energising and expanding the existing SACEUR-Gerasimov channel. Some saw this as a politically viable first step for NATO members to agree on at the upcoming June 2021 summit. Rather than being driven by formal agendas, high-level meetings should have the flexibility to include scenarios and contingencies and to discuss pragmatic solutions. Participants also suggested further steps that could be taken, including the re-establishment of the Russian military liaison at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) headquarters, or at other key operational hubs such as NATO’s AIRCOM and Ballistic Missiles Defence Operations Center.

Priority areas

Participants identified priority areas which require an urgent enhancement of NATO-Russia military-to-military dialogue to properly mitigate the risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding leading to accidental escalation. These included:

1. Avoiding possible crisis arising from the deployment of short and intermediate-range missiles in Europe.
2. An exchange of, and discussion about, Defence Doctrines. This is intended to reduce misunderstandings and misperceptions.
3. A mechanism to provide notification of location and scale of exercises – including snap exercises.
4. Greater warning and transparency of heavy bombers sorties close to NATO/Russia borders.
5. Commencement of discussions about the future risk of emerging military technologies, including hypersonic missiles. This will encourage consideration of future risks rather than solving yesterday's problems.

Round table details

Moderator:

- **Cynthia Roberts** - Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies.

Panellists:

- **Sergey Rogov** - Institute for the US and Canadian Studies of the Russian Academy of Science (ISKRAN)
- **Kori Schake** - American Enterprise Institute (AEI)
- **Admiral Valentin Kuznetsov** - Former military representative of Russia to NATO
- **Sir Graham Stacey** – European Leadership Network



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