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Working paper on strategic risk reduction

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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.

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Introduction

During the tenth NPT review cycle, many States parties have signalled their renewed interest in risk reduction.¹ In light of deteriorating geopolitical relations among the P5, the risk of a conventional conflict, which could unintentionally escalate into a nuclear one, has increased. During France's tenure as the coordinator of the P5 process in 2020-2021, and possibly 2022, conversations on reducing the risks of involuntary escalation have taken place.²

While the risk issue must be dealt with as comprehensively as possible, the deteriorating security environment, fuelled by major power competition, makes a sustained risk reduction conversation, especially among the P5, a promising first measure. Such a P5 risk reduction dialogue would help to avert one of the biggest nuclear risks today; that is, the risk of misinterpretation and miscalculation leading to an inadvertent escalation of conflict.

The presidents of the P5 states have all recognised this intensifying geopolitical competition, and the risks that ensue from it, in recent speeches. In February 2020, French President Macron stated that "A new hierarchy of powers is being outlined, bringing with it a global uninhibited strategic competition that could generate risks of incidents and uncontrolled military escalation in the future."³ In March 2021, British Prime Minister Johnson warned of "A more competitive world,"⁴ while the UK's integrated review refers to a "deteriorating security environment"⁵ in the world. In April 2021, US President Biden stated that "We must prepare together for a long-term strategic competition."⁶ In the same month, Russian president Putin noted that,

At the same time, unfortunately, it seems that everyone in the world is already used to it, accustomed to the practice of politically motivated, illegal sanctions in the economy, to the crude attempts of some to impose their will on others by force... We really want to have good relations with all participants in international society, including, by the way, with those with whom our relations have not been developing lately, to put it mildly. We really don't want to burn bridges. But if someone perceives our good intentions as indifference or weakness and himself intends to finally burn or even blow up these bridges, he should know that Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift and harsh.⁷

In July 2021, Chinese President Xi stated that,

We Chinese are a people who uphold justice and are not intimidated by threats of force. As a nation, we have a strong sense of pride and confidence. We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other

country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people. We must carry out a great struggle with many contemporary features.⁸

While work has taken place on risk reduction during this review cycle, dealing with both “nuclear” and “strategic” risks, there is still no common understanding of the concept. Similarly, the “nuclear-strategic” dichotomy has been unhelpful in cultivating a conversation around devising practical, feasible risk reduction measures that could be implemented immediately. Instead of focusing on producing implementable measures, the “nuclear-strategic” dichotomy has emphasised two opposed approaches to risk reduction. In some regional theatres, the reduction of conventional escalation risks would make a significant net contribution to nuclear risk reduction as well, highlighting that it is not always easy to isolate nuclear risks from other escalation factors.

This working paper calls for a sustained, open-ended and senior dialogue process among the P5 on strategic risk reduction in the form of a working group. The aim of this dialogue process is not only to arrive at a common P5 understanding of “strategic” risks but also to adopt a programme of work to mitigate those risks through substantive measures during the eleventh NPT review cycle.

P5 work on risk reduction would build on previous interest in the issue in the NPT context, including the 13 steps (agreed at the 2000 NPT review conference) as well as the 64-point action plan (agreed at the 2010 NPT review conference).⁹ Among others, these steps encompass reducing the operational status of nuclear weapons systems, increasing transparency of nuclear-weapon states with regard to their nuclear weapons capabilities, and extending security assurances to more non-nuclear-weapon states.

Reducing strategic risks

President Macron’s 2020 speech, the 2021 UK integrated review, and President Putin’s 2021 State of the Union speech all single out “systemic competition” as the root cause of the deteriorating security environment. This systemic competition could result in misperceptions about each other’s actions, which in turn could lead to inadvertent escalation. The P5 should address a number of the following strategic risk areas.

Amid this strategic competition, the nature of confrontation and competition is changing, resulting in fluid lines between systemic competition and confrontation.

Grey zones, characterised by asymmetrical actions to increase leverage, provoke a disturbance or intimidate a stakeholder, ensue.

The application of new technologies - such as artificial intelligence, cyber technology, or quantum physics - to defence and security scenarios raises new questions. The lack of a common framework, in particular regarding the interaction between new technologies and nuclear command and control systems, contributes to instability. The P5 should ensure that the application of new technology contributes to improved strategic stability (for instance, by providing a more complete and accurate assessment of what is actually happening in a situation).

To reduce the risks from doctrinal and escalatory pathways to nuclear use, states need a better understanding of each other's concerns to ensure that they act in ways that are predictable to the extent their military doctrine allows and that their behaviour does not create incentives for nuclear use.

A P5 strategic risk reduction dialogue could help address the underlying concerns. It could foster a greater understanding of each other's policies and a common conception of strategic risk reduction.

A P5 strategic risk reduction working group would:

- Help formulate a common understanding of "strategic risks" and measures to address them. This could help enhance mutual understanding of strategic concerns and reduce the risk of miscalculation.

According to President Putin's 2021 State of the Union speech,

Precisely as a leader in the creation of new generation combat systems, in the development of modern nuclear forces, Russia once again urges its partners to discuss issues related to strategic weapons and ensuring global stability. The subject, the goal of such negotiations may be to create an environment of conflict-free coexistence based on a security equation that would encompass not only traditional strategic weapons: intercontinental ballistic missiles, heavy bombers and submarines, but also, I emphasize, all offensive and defensive systems capable of solving strategic tasks, regardless of their equipment. The countries of the nuclear five have a special responsibility here. I hope that the initiative for a personal meeting of the heads of state - permanent members of the UN Security Council, which we put forward last year, will be implemented, and it will take place as soon as epidemiological conditions permit.¹⁰

- Assess possible risks in connection with policies, doctrines, postures and discuss each other's strategic logic and the contents of military doctrines. Qualified ambiguities in nuclear doctrines and the entanglement of nuclear and non-nuclear command-and-control systems are examples that can induce escalation in such grey zone conflicts.
- Assess the possible escalation risks in grey zone conflicts, whether direct escalation from grey zone to nuclear conflict or the slow escalation of a conventional conflict to nuclear, to ensure that no incentives are inadvertently created for the use of nuclear weapons.
- Assess the risks related to existing and new capabilities, with a particular emphasis on emerging technologies. These could include developing a common vocabulary on emerging technologies, formulating the "rules of the road", and discussing the role of human control in nuclear launch decisions.
- Assess possible risks in connection with global and regional security crises. Particularly useful in this regard would be to have a South China Sea dialogue and to raise the issue of fear of escalation or brinkmanship along the NATO-Russia border.
- Assess differences of opinion about the capabilities and intentions behind missile defence systems, differences of opinion about the reality of Russian doctrine regarding the use of nuclear weapons as warfighting weapons, and the scope for interference with space-based surveillance systems. These issues should be discussed individually to achieve an honest and frank dialogue on each of them.

Enhancing strategic stability

A P5 dialogue process enhances strategic stability (that is, the absence of incentives to launch a nuclear strike) by discussing and adopting a programme of work to mitigate strategic risks through substantive measures during the eleventh NPT review cycle.¹¹ These measures should address strategic risks as comprehensively as possible along the doctrinal and escalatory pathways to nuclear use.

To demonstrate the willingness to deal with the risk issue as comprehensively as possible, the P5 states should commit to carefully considering the plethora of measures set forth by NPT States parties and civil society to enhance strategic stability. These include:

- Practical measures to reduce the risk of the use of nuclear weapons by miscalculation through technical measures to foster confidence and through tools to increase communication (e.g., hotlines, risk reduction centres) as outlined by the Stockholm Initiative in working paper NPT/CONF.2020/WP.9 (paragraph 8, d, ii).¹² In a developing crisis, these measures will help avoid misunderstandings by ensuring transparency over actions.
- A declaratory commitment against nuclear war as a confidence-building measure. Alternatively, a declaratory commitment to reduce the role and significance of nuclear weapons (in military and security concepts, doctrines and policies).
- Regular exchanges between the P5 and non-nuclear-weapon states on risk reduction.

A dialogue process on strategic risk should also address (longer-term) measures to enhance strategic stability and to relaunch non-proliferation and disarmament dynamics, including a new arms control framework in Europe following the collapse of the INF Treaty as well as efforts to achieve a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) and the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Outcomes if the suggestions in the paper are adopted:

1. If adopted, these recommendations would increase the predictability of international politics and the strengthening of strategic stability;
2. Give more weight to the often advocated step-by-step approach towards nuclear disarmament as favoured by the P5 and some non-nuclear-weapon states. The Stockholm Initiative has suggested opportunities for the P5 to make progress in this direction;¹³
3. Feed into the narrative of a broader reflection on the future of arms control;
4. Promote a common perspective on strategic risk reduction;
5. Adopt specific deliverables in the next NPT review cycle, and a clear outline of this work will continue throughout the next NPT review cycle.

Endnotes

1. This working paper is the result of the ELN's and the FRS's work to support risk reduction in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The ideas presented herein have been explored with officials and experts from all P5 states and some non-nuclear-weapon states in consultations in the period June 2020 to December 2021. In December 2021, the P5 formally announced the inclusion of "strategic risk reduction" into their working group on nuclear doctrines and policies as "separate but related topics" with the publication of working paper NPT/CONF.2020/WP.33. We note with satisfaction that some of the ideas explored in this paper, such as the recommendations to establish a strategic risk reduction working group and to make a joint declaratory commitment against nuclear war, have been adopted by the P5. We hope that the P5 will explore some of the other recommendations set forth in this working paper to agree on a substantive programme of work in the run-up to the postponed 2020 NPT review conference and beyond.
2. France was due to hand the role of coordinator to the United States at the tenth NPT review conference in January 2022. At the time of publication, the tenth NPT review conference had just been postponed again, from January 2022 to August 2022, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and there had been no clarification yet on whether France would continue as coordinator until the review conference convenes or whether the United States would take over as coordinator from January 2022.
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4. (2021) "Johnson's foreign policy review warns of 'deteriorating security environment'", NewsChain (online), 16 March, <https://www.newschainonline.com/news/johnsons-foreign-policy-review-warns-of-deteriorating-security-environment-127086>.
5. HM Government (2021) "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Security Policy", London: Cabinet Office, 16 March, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>, p. 29.
6. E. Ashford (2021) "Great-Power Competition is a recipe for disaster", Foreign Policy (online), 1 April, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/01/china-usa-great-power-competition-recipe-for-disaster/>.
7. V. Putin (2021) "State of the nation address", Moscow, 21 April, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/65418>.
8. J. Xi (2021) "Address on the 100th Anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party", Beijing, 1 July, <https://qz.com/2028306/xi-jinping-speech-transcript-for-the-ccps-100th-anniversary/>.
9. NPT Review Conference (2000) Final Document: Volume 1, NPT/CONF.2000/28 (Parts I and II), New York: United Nations; NPT Review Conference (2010) Final Document: Volume 1, NPT/CONF.2010/50, New York: United Nations.
10. V. Putin (2021) "State of the nation address", Moscow, 21 April, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/65418>.
11. While alternative definitions of strategic stability exist, this more traditional definition remains useful in this context.

12. (2021) "A Nuclear Risk Reduction Package", working paper by the Stockholm Initiative, supported by Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, NPT/CONF.2020/ WP.9, New York: United Nations.
13. (2020) "Stepping Stones for Advancing Nuclear Disarmament", joint working paper submitted by Argentina, Canada, Finland, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, NPT/CONF.2020/ WP.6, New York: United Nations; (2021) "A Nuclear Risk Reduction Package", working paper by the Stockholm Initiative, supported by Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland, NPT/CONF.2020/ WP.9, New York: United Nations.



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