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Building better security for wider Europe

Can Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) help manage European crises?

Policy brief

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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.

Dr Ian Anthony is the Programme Director for European Security at SIPRI. In addition to monitoring and analysing developments in European security, the programme currently focuses on some specific challenges facing Europe. *Military Risk Reduction in Europe* examines the role of military-to-military contacts; the experience with sub-regional CSBMs in Northern Europe; and the experience with technical risk reduction measures such as incidents at sea agreements. *Reassessing CBRN Threats in a Changing Global Environment* assesses how risks posed by hazardous materials have changed since 2014, the measures being taken to manage risk and steps that might be taken to enhance the effectiveness of responses.

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Executive summary

Military security in central Europe is heavily influenced by the geopolitics of major power relations. However, even in a period of increased tension and minimal trust, it is not too soon to begin thinking about how local actors can increase their agency and design ways and means to coexist in the space they must share in perpetuity.

Decisions taken by the governments of Belarus, Poland and Ukraine, collective decisions by NATO and by Belarus and Russia will increase the number of armed forces in central Europe regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

After 2000 Belarus, Poland and Ukraine signed bilateral agreements to increase transparency about military exercises and created consultation procedures to address any questions arising from military activities. While recent events suggest that these measures are limited in the degree to which they can shield particularly exposed states from the consequences of a problem they did not create, before abandoning local measures, it would be useful to give serious thought to how they might be strengthened.

To strengthen smaller-scale discussion formats, this paper puts forward a few key ideas: a) make military-to-military contacts more frequent and link the military-to-military consultation to parallel meetings between national security advisors, b) within existing bilateral agreements, consider further lowering notification thresholds, expanding geographical scope of coverage and bringing in additional types of security forces, c) explore a tailored agreement on the prevention of dangerous military activities, and d) restore the meetings of national security advisers and expand meetings.

The context for Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs)

In January 2022 meetings at the NATO–Russia Council and at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) provided a reminder that Europe has several institutions available to facilitate security dialogue, should states choose to use them. These meetings discussed draft treaties that Russia presented to the United States and to NATO in December 2021.¹ However, on 24 February 2022, when Russia began its second war of aggression against Ukraine in the space of eight years, avenues for diplomatic dialogue quickly closed.

The space for dialogue was shrinking before military action began. When Ukraine called for a joint session of the OSCE Forum for Security Cooperation and Permanent Council on 18 February Russia did not attend.² Once military action was underway, the Polish OSCE Chairman noted that the aggression ‘undermines all OSCE efforts to settle the conflict in and around Ukraine, particularly within existing negotiation formats, in which the Trilateral Contact Group has a leading role’.³ On 25 February the United States suspended bilateral strategic stability talks with Russia.⁴ The Russian invasion has had a spill over impact in international bodies that have kept themselves outside geopolitics. On 3 March Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States suspended participation in the Arctic Council and its subsidiary bodies.⁵

The space for diplomacy has shrunk, but the Tällberg Foundation has pointed out, ‘as hard as it is to imagine amidst the unfolding tragedy of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the diplomats and politicians will eventually gather to define new borders, behaviours, and rules’.⁶

The primary target for Russian diplomacy (including the ‘diplomacy of violence’) is the United States, and among the European institutions with a security focus, NATO

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has now moved to the centre from a Russian perspective. While Russia speaks to European capitals, particularly Berlin and Paris, it does not seem interested in the EU as a dialogue partner. As the currency of European security is now military power, Russia sees no purpose in paying close attention to an entity with nothing in its bank account.

There is a natural tendency to focus on the high politics of major power interactions. However, Russian control over Belarus and Ukraine would fundamentally change the strategic geography of Europe, with the land border between NATO and an adversary extended by more than one thousand kilometres.

While any predictions in present conditions are unsafe, the prospects for future strategic agreements between the United States and Russia—already highly uncertain because of the position over the need to include China—may have diminished further. Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine cannot escape the combined effects of their geographical location, military, and political alignment and will have to find a way to coexist.

Bilateral and perhaps trilateral discussions cannot replace major power discussions, nor will they change the behaviour of major military powers. Some hold the view that ‘low level’ discussions are pointless.⁷ Nevertheless, might European states act to reduce the risk to themselves and perhaps influence politico-military ‘high politics’?

In November 1999 the participating states of the OSCE agreed on a modification to the Vienna Document—the agreement arising out of negotiations on confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) in Europe. Among other things, the revised Vienna Document encouraged OSCE participating States ‘to undertake, including on the basis of separate agreements, in a bilateral, multilateral or regional context, measures to increase transparency and confidence’.^{8,9} Are there elements already in place that could provide modest building blocks for future coexistence?

After November 1999 a number of agreements were made in response to the encouragement from the OSCE, including bilateral agreements between Belarus on the one hand and Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine on the other. Poland and Ukraine also finalised the content of a bilateral agreement on additional CSBMs.¹⁰ These have sometimes been characterised as peripheral, ‘fair weather’ agreements that cannot have a meaningful impact on the real-world security problems facing European states. Is that characterization accurate? If not, how have bilateral CSBMs contributed to enhance security? If the criticism is fair, can bilateral CSBMs be supplemented in ways that could make them more useful?

From cooperation to confrontation in the Belarus/Poland/Ukraine triangle

As recently as August and September 2019 the United States National Security Advisor and the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs visited Belarus, and in August 2019 senior security council officials from Belarus, Poland, the United States, and Ukraine met in Warsaw.¹¹ These events were preparations for a visit by the US Secretary of State to Belarus in February 2020. In 2019 Belarus pointed to its 'vibrant cooperation' with Ukraine, including an expanding set of bilateral cooperation arrangements.¹²

After a period of optimism, in 2021 the military security environment deteriorated rapidly. By the middle of 2021 the rhetoric of the most senior leaders was confrontational, and actions indicated a rapid militarization of relations. In response to a concentration of irregular migrants at the Belarus-Poland border, Poland moved roughly 6,000 soldiers to the border to supplement border security forces blocking entry. The Czech Republic and the United Kingdom agreed to send soldiers to assist Poland with border management.

In what was described as a surprise combat readiness check of Airborne Forces, Russian paratroopers made an airdrop close to the Belarussian city of Grodno, in the vicinity of the border with Lithuania and Poland.¹³ Two Russian Tu-22M3 long-range bombers conducted a patrol in Belarussian airspace in what was described as an operational check of the integrated air defence of the Union State.¹⁴ Poland accused Belarussian border guards of firing blank rounds at Polish soldiers and border guards, perhaps to provoke an escalatory action that could be used to shape the public narrative—an allegation denied by Belarus. It can be added that the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior alleged that Belarussian border guards crossed illegally into Lithuania to facilitate irregular migration, something that Belarus also denied.

At the end of 2021 President Aleksandr Lukashenko labelled Ukraine a 'second front' in Western hybrid attacks on Belarus.¹⁵ President Lukashenko stated that if conflict between Ukraine and Russia escalated 'it is clear whose side Belarus will be on'.¹⁶ Belarus Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin announced a military exercise with Russia near the Ukrainian border that has now been unmasked as part of Russia's preparation to invade Ukraine.¹⁷ Bilateral arrangements to increase the transparency around military activities might have been expected to play a significant role during this period of increasing tension.

Bilateral CSBMs: context and content

The provisions of the 1990 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty still apply in all three countries, as well as the politically binding provisions of the Vienna Document, but separate local measures have also been developed.

In October 2001 the Government of Belarus and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine agreed on bilateral measures to promote confidence and security 'guided by the obligations set out in the Charter on European Security adopted at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit and the Vienna Document 1999'.¹⁸ In April 2004 Poland and Ukraine also reached agreement on additional CSBMs.¹⁹ After three years of discussions, Belarus and Poland agreed on the content of additional CSBMs in July 2004, and an agreement was signed by the Ministers of Defence of Belarus and Poland in November 2004.²⁰

Parallel processes of NATO enlargement and the further development of European arms control provided context for these bilateral agreements. Based on a 1997 invitation, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO in 1999. At the 1999 NATO Summit in Washington seven additional countries were invited to begin the accession process, and those countries joined the Alliance in 2004. In 1999 an agreement was reached to adapt the 1990 CFE Treaty and important changes were made to the Vienna Document in 1999, including the introduction of the chapter on regional measures noted above.

For Poland, bilateral agreements with Belarus and Ukraine were a signal that NATO membership did not reduce the appetite for dialogue and cooperation with a neighbour on military issues.²¹ Belarus and Ukraine characterised their bilateral agreement as an effort to mitigate the secondary effects of a downturn in relations between Russia and NATO arising out of disagreements over NATO enlargement.²²

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The Vienna Document calls for advance notification of military activities involving at least 9,000 troops, at least 250 battle tanks, at least 500 armoured combat vehicles, or at least 250 heavy artillery pieces. Each bilateral agreement lowered those thresholds.

The measures agreed by Belarus and Ukraine in October 2001 lowered the notification thresholds to at least 5000 military personnel, 100 battle tanks, 150 armoured combat vehicles, or 75 heavy artillery systems. The measures agreed to by Belarus and Poland in July 2004 lowered notification thresholds to military activities involving at least 6000 military personnel, 150 main battle tanks, 250 armoured combat vehicles, or 150 large-calibre artillery systems. The measures agreed to by Poland and Ukraine in April 2004 lowered notification thresholds to military activities involving at least 6000 military personnel, 100 main battle tanks, 150 armoured combat vehicles, or 75 large-calibre artillery systems.

The Vienna Document also required notification of air forces participating in military activities if they were expected to fly 200 or more sorties. The measures agreed to by Belarus and Ukraine and Poland and Ukraine lowered this notification threshold to 50 sorties. The agreement between Belarus and Poland lowered the threshold to 100 sorties.

The Vienna Document required the notification of military activities involving the insertion of more than 3,000 amphibious or airborne forces. The measures agreed to by Belarus and Ukraine and between Belarus and Poland reduced this threshold to 1000 and 1500 troops respectively.

The bilateral agreement between Poland and Ukraine applied provisions on notification, inspection, and evaluation of Internal Security Forces and Border Troops. In addition, Poland and Ukraine agreed that military activities within 10 kilometres of the border should be restricted to units of battalion size or smaller.

The bilateral agreements between Belarus and Ukraine and between Belarus and Poland provided for one additional inspection and one additional evaluation visit over and above those called for in the Vienna Document. The agreement between Poland and Ukraine provided for one additional inspection and two additional evaluation visits.

In all three cases the agreements only apply to military activities in a designated part of a country's national territory, not to the country as a whole, and measures only apply to national activities. When multiple countries join together to conduct military exercises—either in an alliance framework or because additional countries are invited to participate in national exercises—the provisions in the Vienna Document apply.

The 1999 Vienna Document encouraged states to build on existing mechanisms for consultation and co-operation in case of unusual military activities. The agreement between Belarus and Ukraine linked convening a meeting to discuss unusual military activities (as called for in the Vienna Document) to an invitation to observe the activities in question.

Each bilateral agreement included annual meetings to assess implementation and discuss how improvements could enhance the security of the parties. However, the provisions of the bilateral agreements were used less often over time as military activities at scale became few and far between. Furthermore, military forces were not particularly dynamic in any of the three countries, and as a result the same units were being visited yearly with little change recorded.

In 2007 Poland suggested expanding the zone of application to allow visits and discussions to include a wider spectrum of military units.²³ However, the agreements have remained unamended to this point.

Bilateral CSBMs in a period of tension

The bilateral arrangements worked well in a benign security environment, but the deterioration in relations has revealed shortcomings.

In November 2021 Belarus expressed surprise that Poland had not either notified its movement of military units to the border noted above or invited observation, and ‘there was not even an intention regarding readiness to discuss the existing concerns’.²⁴ Polish and Belarussian officials did convene to discuss the November 2021 exercise in Belarus that also involved Russian airborne forces noted above.

In December 2021 Belarus accused Ukraine of unusual and provocative military actions, including crossing the border into Belarusian air space. Ukraine denied the allegations and characterised them as ‘spreading accusations for manipulative purposes’, but Belarus further asserted that Kyiv was ‘avoiding a dialogue to resolve disputes, which is very worrying’.²⁵

The bilateral agreements reached with Belarus in the early 2000s are still in force, and meetings have been convened under their auspices. However, events in 2021 illustrated the limits to their impact, and they did not halt the downward spiral in relations between Belarus and its neighbours.

Supplementary actions

As the security situation deteriorated the local CSBMs contributed very little to help arrest the decline. What ideas could be considered to enhance the security benefits of local arrangements?

It is perhaps useful to address that question by differentiating three elements: communication, dialogue, and negotiation. Communication is the exchange of accurate information while dialogue is a discussion intended to define and solve problems. Communication can reveal the 'what' element of a negative security development, dialogue can illuminate the 'why'. Negotiations seek to codify and perhaps institutionalize agreements in a politically or legally binding format with the possibility of applying some form of sanction in case of non-compliance.

Maintain military contacts during a political crisis or period of political tension

While states will certainly try to obtain accurate, real-time information using their national means, combined with information from friends and allies, this does not preclude seeking information from states directly involved in a dispute. The transparency measures that OSCE participating states have made include a political commitment to provide a large volume of aggregate data on military matters. However, direct communication between military staffs with detailed local knowledge under a more flexible bilateral or trilateral arrangement could be a valuable step in understanding unfolding situations that have the potential to escalate.

The degradation of the European framework for arms control has been a recent concern, but Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine remain parties to the main elements: the 1990 CFE Treaty, the Vienna Document, and the Open Skies Treaty. All of the countries have the institutional capacity and national expertise to engage in a detailed discussion of military activities of potential concern. However, this expertise is not being fully exploited.

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The August 2020 presidential election in Belarus was judged to be neither free nor fair, and in its aftermath public protests were violently suppressed. Poland has supported five rounds of EU sanctions against Belarus prompted by the internal political conditions, and Ukraine joined the EU in blocking access to its airspace for aircraft registered in Belarus. As a result, virtually all forms of contact between Belarus and its neighbours have been suspended.

As noted above, in 2019 senior security council officials from Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine were meeting one another. Such meetings could be exempt from the restrictive measures applied after 2020. Military-to-military contacts and communication over politico-military developments between neighbouring states could also be exempted from the restrictive measures that were imposed to try and bring about domestic political change. As a means to test and validate information obtained from other sources, these types of communication can promote understanding of legitimate defensive military activities and help to allay any suspicion that military activities are of an offensive character.

Restore discussions among national security advisers

Arranging confidential discussions of a more political nature is challenging in the contemporary media environment because tight control over information flows has become difficult. However, it is perhaps more important than ever for decision makers to understand the true intent behind actions.

Regular meetings between national security advisers could help individuals to develop personal relationships that facilitate understanding of when actions initiated to develop a political narrative for domestic consumption appear more alarming than they are in reality. Conversely, when an action is intended as a serious warning about a dangerous development, such a signal should be clearly understood.

A bilateral or trilateral format in the Belarus/Poland/Ukraine 'triangle' could probably never be a forum for the negotiation of an agreement that limits military forces, because two of the states have alliance commitments that reflect wider strategic considerations. However, personal relationships may prove to be valuable later if it becomes possible to meet in more formal settings. Such a relationship could prove educational for the current context as well.

“It is perhaps more important than ever for decision makers to understand the true intent behind actions.”

Expand from a bilateral to a trilateral format

The bilateral CSBM agreements on each leg of the Belarus/Poland/Ukraine triangle have small differences in details, but they are similar in their intent, structure, and implementation.

Expanding the conversation into a trilateral format would provide additional context and information to inform national decisions. Officers from all three countries would join together at inspections, evaluation visits, and annual assessment meetings, all of which would provide a valuable framework for military-to-military discussions among the three parties. The agreement between Poland and Ukraine also contains a provision for annual meetings between parliamentarians, journalists, and experts to discuss military security matters. Adding this provision to the trilateral format would also be worth considering.

Focus on dangerous military activities

In June 1989 the Soviet Union and the United States reached an agreement on measures to reduce the probability that military activities would lead to dangerous repercussions.²⁶ The purpose of the agreement was to reduce the possibility of incidents arising between the two countries' armed forces and, if any incident did take place, to resolve the matter expeditiously and peacefully.

The agreement defined incidents that could lead to dangerous consequences, such as armed forces inadvertently crossing the border and entering foreign territory without warning or operating electronic equipment in a manner that inadvertently interfered with command-and-control networks. The agreement also defined 'Special Caution Areas' where military activities might be considered especially sensitive.

In the agreement the parties laid out procedures and created mechanisms to inform each other about any concerns arising from military activities, to explain the nature of the activity, and to respond in ways that minimize risks.

The specific content of any agreement between Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine to reduce the risks arising from military activities would necessarily be different from that contained in the 1989 document given the nature of the armed forces involved and changes in strategic geography and military technology. However, a trilateral discussion to see whether measures could be designed to achieve the same objectives could yield potential value.

Consider expanding the scope of confidence- and security-building to other security agencies

As noted above, the rapid deterioration in relations between Belarus and its neighbours can be partly explained by non-military dimensions of security such as effective border control, air safety, and effective measures to combat illicit trafficking in people and weapons.

Trilateral initiatives on topics of this kind involving non-military security agencies could be more difficult to exempt from the reciprocal restrictive measures and sanctions that Belarus and its neighbours have imposed on one another after 2020. However, whether consultations of this kind can play a constructive role in reducing security risk deserves further consideration. The OSCE—where these issues are already under discussion in a pan-European framework—might be more fertile ground.

Potential wider impact of local measures

As noted above, there are knowledgeable observers that see no point in discussions with Belarus since it ‘can no longer be treated as an independent subject of international relations, but as a vassal state dependent on Russia’.²⁷ While Ukraine continues to fight fiercely for its independence, developments on the battlefield may lead to the installation of a ‘puppet’ government and the stationing of Russian troops inside Ukraine for an indefinite period.

Regrettable though such an outcome would be, it is not inconceivable. In that case the West, collectively, would certainly have a similar view to the one taken after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968—when the Alliance refused to recognize any arrangements ‘concluded under the pressure of occupying forces’.²⁸

Poland and Belarus have a primary responsibility to ensure their national defence, but for these countries plans are linked to support provided by allies. Under these circumstances, local arrangements could provide an avenue for major power communication by proxy.

Final reflections

Local measures cannot solve the problem of how to manage the consequences of Russian discontent with the contemporary security order in Europe. Recent events suggest that the measures put in place in the early 2000s are also very limited in the degree to which they can shield particularly exposed states from the consequences of a problem they did not create. The main argument of this paper has been that before abandoning local measures it would be useful to give serious thought to how they might be strengthened.

Several suggestions for potential next steps have been sketched—though all of them would require further elaboration.

- Make military-to-military contacts more frequent and expand the bilateral format into a trilateral Belarus/Poland/Ukraine consultation. Link the military-to-military consultation to parallel meetings between the national security advisers of the three countries.
- Within existing bilateral agreements, consider further lowering notification thresholds, expanding geographical scope of coverage and bringing in additional types of security forces.
- Explore a tailored agreement on the prevention of dangerous military activities.
- Restore the meetings of national security advisers and expand the meetings into a trilateral format. Ensure that the individuals involved have direct access to the most senior decision makers.

“Before abandoning local measures it would be useful to give serious thought to how they might be strengthened.”

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