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# Strategic Risk Reduction in the European Context

Risk Assessment and Policy Recommendations

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## BASIC

BASIC promotes meaningful dialogue amongst governments and experts in order to build international trust, reduce nuclear risks, and advance disarmament. Since 1987, we have developed a global reputation for convening empathic dialogues that help states acknowledge and overcome complex strategic and political differences.

We envision a world that uses cooperative measures to achieve peace and security, rather than the threat or use of force. This world will be achieved by taking steps that promote mutual security at the international, regional, national, and individual levels, and sustained through resilient international norms and law.

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>01</b>
<b>Assessing the risk of misperception and miscalculation in Europe</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Policy recommendations</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>Recommendations at a glance</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>12</b>





# Introduction

States have employed risk reduction strategies in order to manage some of the unintended consequences of tensions between nuclear armed states since the Cold War. While this work has focused mostly on reducing risks related to proliferation of nuclear materials, nuclear terrorism and nuclear accidents throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, strategic risk reduction has returned as a topic of global importance in this Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Cycle. Risks faced and actors involved vary by geographic region, but the overarching consensus is that the risks of nuclear escalation have increased globally.<sup>1</sup> Experts share the concern that while risks have increased, the risk management tools of the Cold War have fallen into disuse since the late 80s.<sup>2</sup>

In the tense 2020 NPT review cycle, risk reduction can also serve as a political tool. It has the potential to provide a practical foundation for collaboration even under challenging conditions in a polarised system. However, relying on risk reduction as a unifier does not come without problems. Even among European allies, there is no common understanding on definitions of nuclear risk and best practice when it comes to approaches to risk reduction. While this does not have to be negative and to an extent is to be expected in a diverse alliance with different national capabilities, it carries its own risks of potentially exacerbating polarisations between Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) and Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) if care is not taken to ensure that all allies understand each other's threat perceptions. Some NNWS are concerned that in a time where arms control agreements of the past are falling apart, NWS are using risk reduction

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- 1 Wilfred Wan, "Nuclear Risk Reduction: The State of Ideas" (UNIDIR 2019) <https://unidir.org/files/publications/pdfs/nuclear-risk-reduction-the-state-of-ideas-en-767.pdf>
  - 2 House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations, "Rising nuclear risk, disarmament and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty" (April 2019) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/338/338.pdf>

rhetoric as a detraction from taking further disarmament steps or engaging in arms control conversations. This fear is rooted in the slow progress in disarmament and arms control over the previous NPT Review Cycle (2011-2015), which is compounded by the sense of backsliding in the current Review Cycle (2016-2020/21).<sup>3</sup> Concerns around losing what has already been achieved in the areas of arms control and disarmament are justified given the end of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaties and uncertainties about the extension of New START.<sup>4</sup> However, developing sustainable measures in order to reduce nuclear risks is warranted and justified as risk reduction measures short of arms control treaties and disarmament steps can help stabilise the strategic and political environment enough for more extensive measures to be considered. Furthermore, many risk reduction measures, including those discussed in this report, can be taken immediately and involve few preconditions or extensive negotiations. Implementing them will have a positive effect on the wider security environment. As such, they have the potential to lay a foundation for further, more extensive risk reduction measures such as returning to arms control negotiations which can be updated to work for contemporary strategic considerations, or further disarmament measures.

## Project and methodology

This report marks the end of an 18-months project between BASIC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. In January 2019, we set out to examine what factors contributed to nuclear risks increasing in Europe, and what steps could be taken in order to reduce them. Areas of contention between Russia and NATO have been growing in scope and significance since the early 2000s and point to fundamentally different interpretations of each others' actions which in turn further increases tensions. The first report in this project analyses in depth what has led to these heightened risks. The biggest risk European states face stems from misperception and miscalculation, which can lead to inadvertent escalation.<sup>5</sup>

In brief, it focuses on **four root causes** of increasing nuclear risks:

### Mistrust

Tensions between Russia and the United States stem from the late 1990s and were highlighted in 2002 by the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Russia interpreted this decision as a US long term plan to develop missile defence capabilities with a view to neutralising Russia's nuclear forces and achieving strategic dominance. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its violation of the INF Treaty, and announcement in early 2018 of a new suite of new strategic nuclear weapons designed to evade missile defences further fueled mistrust. This breakdown in co-operation has undermined the global nonproliferation regime, weakened accepted values and norms, and led to renewed nuclear modernisation plans in both the United States and Russia.

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- 3 Izumi Nakamitsu, "Remarks at the Roundtable Discussion on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty hosted by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and the Permanent Mission of Malaysia to the United States" (New York, 25 October 2018) <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HR-Remarks-at-NPT-Roundtable-on-25-Oct-2018.pdf>
  - 4 Andrey Baklitskiy, "Mapping out an Agenda for U.S.-Russian Arms Control" in *Major Power Rivalry and Nuclear Risk Reduction: Perspectives from Russia, China and the United States* (Ed. Brad Roberts, Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, May 2020) p. 8 <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Major-Power-Rivalry-and-Nuclear-Risk-Reduction.pdf>
  - 5 Maxwell Downman and Marion Messmer, "Re-Emerging Nuclear Risks in Europe" (April 2019) <https://www.basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Risk-Report-Web-1.pdf>; Ankit Panda, "Chapter 3: Multipolarity, Great Power Competition and Nuclear Risk Reduction" in *Nuclear Risk Reduction: Closing Pathways to Use* (Ed. Wilfred Wan, UNIDIR, May 2020) p 57. <https://www.unidir.org/publication/nuclear-risk-reduction-closing-pathways-use>

## **Ambiguity**

Deterrence theorists believe that too much specificity can assist military planning of adversaries and even tempt them to operate with impunity below any red lines. However, the right level of ambiguity is difficult to calculate. Ambiguity increases the likelihood of misperception, miscalculation and nuclear escalation. It is important to ensure that competitors understand signals in the way they are intended.

## **Escalation**

In this confrontational environment, the risk of escalation is compounded by certain nuclear systems, particularly those that facilitate first use or that are dual-capable. These can compress decision-making time and make nuclear escalation more probable.

## **Arms racing**

States are increasingly turning to zero-sum unilateral strategies to pursue security, deepening reliance on nuclear weapons rather than engaging in arms control or risk reduction.<sup>6</sup>

After the first report, we convened three roundables to workshop policy solutions with a wide-ranging group of officials and NGO experts. Over the course of the project, we engaged around 70 different experts from 25 different European states and institutions, including NATO and the EU. The following states were represented in the discussions: Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.<sup>7</sup>

This report picks up at the end of the process. It takes the risk assessment from the first report and goes into more detail in a few key areas of the current state of the relationship between NATO and Russia, focusing on internal dynamics in Europe among the allies and with key partners, the transatlantic relationship as well as areas of tension with Russia. It will then go on to discuss a range of policy options which can help to reduce the risks outlined. Special thanks is due to the experts we engaged who gave extensive feedback on a draft version of the policy recommendations included in this report.

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6 Maxwell Downman and Marion Messmer, "Re-Emerging Nuclear Risks in Europe", p 2.

7 All reports from this project, including the individual roundtable reports, can be found on our website: <https://basicint.org/portfolio/risk-reduction>



# Assessing the risk of misperception and miscalculation in Europe

Low levels of trust between Russia and NATO are hangovers of the Cold War which were never overcome. These low levels of trust mean that Russia and NATO tend to assess each others' postures and decisions assuming worst intent. This dynamic risks spiralling out of control, fuelled by political tensions across all areas of the relationship between Russia and NATO:

- The demise of arms control agreements such as the INF treaty can be attributed to concerns about non-compliance. Some stakeholders in Russia and the United States believe that the other state would only agree to treaties in its benefit, therefore necessarily making any treaty a bad deal for the other.<sup>8</sup> This bad faith assumption makes it difficult to maintain existing arms control agreements or begin to think about new ones because of the background concern that the other actor is operating in concealed ways in order to gain the upper hand. Assuming worst intent incentivises cheating. Compliance and verification are crucial in arms control, but a basic level of trust is an important prerequisite for being able to engage in arms control negotiations. The progressive erosion of trust after a brief window of opportunity in the early years after the end of the Cold War therefore presents a significant barrier to maintaining and expanding arms control agreements.
- Dual-capable systems which can deliver conventional and nuclear warheads have added an additional layer of difficulty to the already difficult task of signalling intent to an adversary.<sup>9</sup> This blurs the line between conventional and nuclear deterrence, and risks increasing tensions unduly. Signal interpretation can vary widely depending on alert levels or levels of tension in the relationship, increasing the possibility that the deployer will underestimate or incorrectly assess the impact changes in deployment have on how the adversary interprets the signal.
- Additionally, escalation pathways are made less clear through the entanglement of nuclear and conventional systems. Adding new capabilities like cyber attacks to the mix can lead to further instability as it is not possible for the attacked to decipher whether a cyber attack on command and control systems was intended to incapacitate conventional or nuclear systems.<sup>10</sup>
- While NWS recognise that modernising arsenals can increase the safety of systems and is a necessity, modernisation plans nevertheless carry much potential for adding confusion and heightening tensions. Modernisation plans can be misinterpreted as their intent is often opaque, or the adversary finds the stated intent not credible. Especially if modernisation plans add new systems, this can lead to an arms racing dynamic where the adversary feels the need to respond by adding new systems as well. The dynamic between Russia leaking news of developing new systems and the 2018 US Posture Review which responded to some of those developments by adding new capabilities of its own, to which Russia then felt the need to respond, exemplifies this danger.<sup>11</sup>
- Operating in a low-trust relationship not only impacts upon assessments at the highest political level; it is reflected across all political levels, including in assessments and research conducted by non-

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8 Ibid, p 58.

9 James Acton, "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War", *International Security*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2018.

10 Ibid.

11 Anna Peczei, Ugne Komzaitė, Benjamin Silverstein & Skyler Stokes, "Nuclear Risk Reduction in an Era of Major Power Rivalry: Workshop Summary" (Centre for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 19-20 February 2020) pp 7-8. <https://cgsrc.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Nuclear-Risk-Reduction-Workshop-Summary.pdf>

governmental experts in universities and think tanks. A political environment characterised by hostile rhetoric and stereotypical thinking about the 'Other' creates the conditions in which risk analyses which pander to worst case assumptions are given more air time and attention than more comprehensive risk analyses, or analyses which take into account several different scenarios.<sup>12</sup> This, in turn, can fuel an outsized sense of concern as only extreme cases are considered.

## Issues faced while managing increased risks in Europe:

Risk reduction ranks high on agendas in several European capitals, at NATO and in the P5 process. France has developed a sophisticated strategic risk reduction agenda which includes a national evaluation of risks and how to respond to them.<sup>13</sup> The UK is also prioritising risk reduction work, focusing on building confidence among allies, increasing understanding and comprehension of doctrine and posture and effective crisis management. France and the UK engage in these topics in a P5 context as well, where risk reduction has become an important agenda item<sup>14</sup>, as well as in NATO with allies and through CEND in a wider global context. This renewed focus on finding pragmatic solutions to reduce risks has the potential to have a very positive impact on the wider security environment, as well as the outcome of the next NPT Review Conference.

- The plurality of actors and fora for conversations involved in the risk reduction conversation in Europe carries the potential for creating tensions over competing priorities and differing risk assessments. It is to be expected that different states with different strategic cultures and capabilities would have different risk assessments and threat perceptions - this fact in itself does not pose a challenge. **However, it's important that states strive to understand each other's risk assessments, threat perceptions and the ensuing possible risk reduction steps.** A good level of mutual understanding in this area would increase alliance cohesion by clarifying expectations and positions.
- In a tense political climate, polarisation among European states and divisions within NATO have increased in more areas than just nuclear policy.<sup>15</sup> European states are facing a range of demanding domestic and regional policy challenges which can be an impediment to reaching agreement or working collaboratively when it comes to an already charged topic like nuclear policy in NATO. **At NATO, discussing different escalation pathways thoroughly could be one way of revealing which areas require more discussion and understanding within the alliance.**
- In addition, the relationship between the US and European allies is also strained in several regards.<sup>16</sup> The US is a key actor in the European risk reduction conversation and while much can be done at the initiative

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12 Ulrich Kühn, "Chapter 5: Nuclear Risk in the Euro-Atlantic" in Nuclear Risk Reduction: Closing Pathways to Use (Ed. Wilfred Wan, UNIDIR, May 2020) pp 103-106. <https://www.unidir.org/publication/nuclear-risk-reduction-closing-pathways-use>

13 Rishi Paul, "Advancing Strategic Risk Reduction in Europe: Perspectives from Paris" (February 2020) <https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/European-Strategies-for-Strategic-Risk-Reduction-WEB.jpg>

14 Sebastian Brixey-Williams, "The P5 Process: The United Kingdom's coordination in 2019-2020" (European Leadership Network Commentary, 20 April 2020) <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-p5-process-the-united-kingdoms-coordination-in-2019-2020/>

15 Jim Townsend and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "NATO is struggling under trans-atlantic tensions" (Foreign Policy 5 Dec 2019) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/05/nato-is-struggling-under-transatlantic-tensions-trump/>

16 David Whineray, "U.S. relations with Europe likely to remain strained regardless of who wins November election" (4 April 2020) <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/04/u.s.-relations-with-europe-likely-to-remain-strained-regardless-who-wins-november-election-pub-81493>

of European states<sup>17</sup>, **risk reduction will go much further and achieve more if the United States acts as an active participant in the conversation.** A few key action points cannot be achieved without US participation: this includes the extension of New START especially, but also engagement in the P5 process.

- A difficult task will be agreeing how to prioritise risks as a few different tensions come to a head in this area. European states without nuclear arsenals don't always trust nuclear armed states to be good stewards of their arsenals and will raise questions around the safety and security of weapons and materials. This was part of the domestic discussion around Germany's participation in NATO's nuclear sharing agreement earlier in 2020. The US, France and the UK tend to respond to these criticisms citing their safety protocols as sufficient. An added difficulty is that the nuclear armed states' need for ambiguity can be taken by European partners without nuclear weapons as a reluctance to be open about certain risks. This feeds into concerns around the safety of arsenals and can make it appear as if NATO's nuclear-armed members do not take the other alliance members seriously when it comes to nuclear issues. **Continued dialogue in this area, as well as expanding existing verification partnerships, are useful tools to further increase all states' level of understanding around the different types of nuclear risk.**
- Emerging technologies add an unprecedented new layer to nuclear risks. We remain far from properly understanding the new challenges we face by introducing a cyber domain to future conflict and escalation dynamics.<sup>18</sup> How cyber security and deterrence interact remains an unanswered question.<sup>19</sup> While some states are showing leadership on this issue by investing in building their own and allies' capacity when it comes to thinking around cyber conflict, we are far from having figured out how cyber conflict relates to conventional or nuclear escalation.
- Messaging has become more complex as communication has become more accessible through social media tools. If a state attempts to send an 'internal' message to a domestic constituency, it is increasingly possible that this message will become an 'external' message to other states as well. As a result, **messages need to be even more carefully considered and need to work across channels for different audiences.**<sup>20</sup> This raises the potential for conflicting demands of a domestic and an external audience.
- Time plays an important part in risk reduction. Some risk reduction measures are short-term and immediate, others have a bigger impact over time and require up-front investment.<sup>21</sup> For example, while communication channels have an immediate crisis management benefit, sustained dialogue on

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17 Angela Kane and Ulrich Kühn, "Nuclear Disarmament, Arms Control, and Nonproliferation in Retreat: What Europe Can Do." S+F Sicherheit und Frieden (Security and Peace), Vol. 36, No. 1, 2018.

18 James Acton, "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risk of an Inadvertent Nuclear War" International Security (August 2018) <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/08/escalation-through-entanglement-how-vulnerability-of-command-and-control-systems-raises-risks-of-inadvertent-nuclear-war-pub-77028>; See also the Nautilus Institute in-depth series on NC3 Systems and Strategic Stability: <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/synthesis-report-nc3-systems-and-strategic-stability-a-global-overview/>

19 Joe Burton, "Cyber Deterrence: A Comprehensive Approach?" NATO Cooperative Cyber Centre of Excellence (April 2018) [https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/BURTON\\_Cyber\\_Deterrence\\_paper\\_April2018.pdf](https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/BURTON_Cyber_Deterrence_paper_April2018.pdf); Beyza Unal and Patricia Lewis, "Cybersecurity of Nuclear Weapons Systems: Threats, Vulnerabilities and Consequences" (Chatham House, January 2018) <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-01-11-cybersecurity-nuclear-weapons-unal-lewis-final.pdf>

20 Ilan Manor, James Pamment, "Towards prestige mobility? Diplomatic prestige and digital diplomacy", Cambridge Review of International Affairs 32:2,(2019) pages 93-131.

21 Anna Peczel, Ugne Komzaite, Benjamin Silverstein & Skyler Stokes, p 4.

doctrines and risk assessments has the added benefit of reducing the risk of misunderstanding and reducing levels of mistrust in a more sustainable manner.

- Arms control agreements were an effective risk reduction tool in the second half of the Cold War. In order to meet some of the new strategic challenges listed above and in order to control new arms racing dynamics, new arms control agreements will be necessary. However, for the time being, there is a lack of consensus on how and in what areas to pursue new arms control agreements.<sup>22</sup> Questions remain about how best to include emerging technologies; the addition of new private sector actors who are at the forefront of research and development when it comes to some of the new digital capabilities around automation, image recognition and machine learning poses an additional challenge.

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22 Lukasz Kulesa, "The Crisis of Nuclear Arms Control and its Impact on European Security." EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers No. 66, Brussels: EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, January 2020. <https://www.nonproliferation.eu/the-crisis-of-nucleararms-control-and-its-impact-on-european-security/>

# Policy recommendations

The recommendations in this report seek to address the challenges outlined above and fall in three broad categories:

- 1) Monitoring and reducing threats
- 2) Working in institutions
- 3) Improving communication efforts

These categories reflect the importance of having clear and reliable data when assessing risks, coordination with allies and proactive and sustained engagement with allies and adversaries in order to minimise misunderstanding. Risk reduction steps can be most effective and wide-reaching if those principles are maintained.

## 1) Monitoring and reducing threats

- How to minimise the dangers to strategic and crisis stability emerging from existing cyber capabilities needs to be addressed in a multilateral context. Many questions remain around how the cyber domain intersects with other strategic domains and what impact it will have on escalation dynamics and crisis management. As far as possible, the United States, France and the UK could **compare their threat assessments and strategic readiness in order to establish best practice**. This could take place in a NATO context, or in a P5 context, including Russia and China. Allies without nuclear weapons can also play an important role in the establishment of best practice examples for readiness when it comes to **increasing resilience for domestic infrastructure and conventional capabilities**. Cyber threats go beyond nuclear command and control; as such, there is space for **joint work between European partners to improve resilience of military and civilian infrastructure**.
- Allied states can lead by example on transparency and arms control, unilaterally or in cooperation. By showing the extent to which a state can maintain its deterrence posture while increasing its transparency, governments can encourage others to remain alert to the right level of ambiguity in their deterrence posture. Proactive transparency from the US, UK or France also signals that the concerns of allies without nuclear weapons are taken seriously and that the states with nuclear weapons want to reassure allies and potential adversaries about their defensive postures.
- An **additional European regional risk reduction centre could independently monitor and verify nuclear and cyber threats**. This would add a potential line of communication in crisis and allow concerned states to receive independent verification of incidents.<sup>23</sup> The cyber dimension is included in the proposed centre's mission in order to address the concerns around inadvertent escalation via cyber threats. For maximum benefit, establishing the risk reduction centre should be a collaborative project including European states and Russia. In that way, it is ensured that everyone trusts the information coming out of the centre. This idea could be implemented via a few different actors: the EU already works on multilateral disaster risk management which could provide a blueprint for collaboration. The OSCE or NATO also have experience coordinating on disaster response and could also provide useful frameworks for taking this work forward.

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23 Ulrich Kühn, "Chapter 5: Nuclear Risk in the Euro-Atlantic" p 108.

- Before further steps to advance disarmament or arms control can be taken, a range of questions need to be answered around several crucial technical areas. In the areas of **verification, emerging technologies** and the **future of arms control**, a wide spectrum of scoping activities are possible. **Taking leadership in these areas by investing in projects dedicated to advancing our understanding of what is possible, what remains to be done and how we can make progress means that we can prepare the technical groundwork as a foundation for action when the political will allows.** There is much room for cooperation across these areas to grow global capacity, but crucially, states can also build their own capacity unilaterally if they want to make progress without having to wait for others. While this measure requires some up-front investment, it has the potential to lead to a large pay-off when it comes to readiness for the next steps in arms control and disarmament.

## 2) Cooperating through institutions

- European NNWS have leverage with the US through NATO and can utilise this to drive discussion and encourage new actors to be brought into the dialogue. Formal and informal conversations in NATO can be used for **advocacy of certain risk reduction measures** (a commonly used current example in this context is encouraging New START extension), but can also be a basis for European NNWS to drive forward the risk reduction agenda generally, through **requesting dialogue on certain issues, and including specific actors.**
- The NATO forum can also be used for individual states to **socialise new arms control ideas and to plan for a brighter future for arms control** more generally. Using the regular contact through NATO is a good way for states to be aware of each others' concerns and limits. This means that it is possible to reach a common understanding of risks outside of individual states' national contexts. A coordinated approach to risk reduction might be more sustainable and has the potential to reduce some of the current tensions among NATO allies.
- NATO as well as bi-lateral security relationships can also be used for extensive dialogue and consultation on how **conventional force postures feed into risk perceptions of potential adversaries and how conventional force postures link up with nuclear doctrine and posture.**<sup>24</sup> This provides an opportunity for allies to deepen their understanding of how different aspects of NATO's deterrence posture might fit together, and how they might be perceived from the outside. Keeping in mind the factors which heighten the risk of misperception and miscommunication around postures outlined earlier in this report, thoroughly investigating how force postures might appear to outside actors ensures that NATO sends exactly the signals it wants to send.
- Equally important to examining factors which can lead to conflict are the factors which can lead to escalation in conflict. A key aspect of risk reduction is having **clarity on escalation management.** This includes devoting time and effort to developing or clarifying clear and agreed off-ramps for conflict. An important consideration here is to test (ideally through workshops or dialogues which include political and military decision-makers from outside the alliance) how certain signals would be received, to ensure as far as possible that they have the intended de-escalatory effect.
- As part of this NPT review cycle, two initiatives are particularly promising when it comes to advancing risk reduction. The **Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND)** initiative is a forum in which risk reduction conversations can happen at a global scale. CEND brings together a wide range of actors: importantly, it includes the United States (as CEND's founder), Russia and China but also India and Pakistan as states outside of the NPT. This could be an opportunity for European states to raise risk

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24 Wolfgang Zellner (Ed.) "Reducing the Risks of Conventional Deterrence in Europe: Arms Control in the NATO-Russia Contact Zone" OSCE Network: OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions (Dec 2018) [https://osce-network.net/file-OSCE-Network/Publications/RISK\\_SP.pdf](https://osce-network.net/file-OSCE-Network/Publications/RISK_SP.pdf)



reduction initiatives or concerns to a global audience and with the potential for far-reaching collaboration. The **Stockholm Initiative** is a group of 16 states led by Sweden and Germany who are looking to provide a range of 'stepping stones' to disarmament. The group has identified risk reduction as an area of focus. This too could provide an opportunity for collaboration on risk reduction with likeminded states.

### 3) Improving communication efforts

- **Strategic communication around risk reduction** not only has a benefit in so far as that it can reduce the risk of misperception and miscommunication; it can also serve as a way to build NATO cohesion and engage civil society. Working towards a shared comprehension of how all members of the alliance assess and understand risks at the national level even if risk assessments or threat perceptions are not shared means that there is a greater level of mutual understanding among allies. This in turn has the potential to result in greater alliance cohesion as allies are better able to take all viewpoints in the alliance into account. It can also improve public messaging as leaders domestically and internationally can make clear why certain priorities are important in the alliance.
- Improving lines of communication is an important risk reduction measure. **Regular and reliable dialogue is not only a crisis de-escalation tool, it can also help stabilise relationships in the long run and reduce risks sustainably.** This includes regular and sustained military-to-military contacts and crisis hotlines, as well as intelligence sharing. The use of crisis hotlines as an immediate risk reduction measure is obvious: further escalation through misperception and miscalculation can be prevented through checking in before making critical decisions. However, operators have highlighted that they have greater trust in these systems if they have had interpersonal contact with those who are likely to pick up on the other end.<sup>25</sup> This highlights the importance of investing in other types of dialogues to increase mutual understanding. **Military-to-military contacts and intelligence sharing build confidence and reduce mistrust in the longer term by allowing for greater understanding of the others' posture and risk assessment, as well as by seeing the types and quality of information the 'other' has access to.**
- Strategic risk reduction as a concept is already being addressed by the European nuclear armed states. Both France and the UK are showing leadership in this area and it is an important agenda item for P5 conversations.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the work already undertaken, it is important to coordinate the UK and France's national positions with P5 and NATO positions where possible. Open risk reduction conversations in a P5 context could already be very helpful for increasing understanding, reducing mistrust and lowering risks for the European context between the US, France, the UK and Russia--but also globally by involving China. From a European point of view, the advantage of the P5 forum is that Russia is included<sup>27</sup>; a challenge is that the NWS have to ensure they communicate in a transparent enough manner with NNWS to keep them informed. **Any mistrust reduction or learning which occurred in a P5 context should then be demonstrated or communicated in a NATO context as well, to ensure progress is passed on as far as possible.**
- Exchanging presentations on doctrine and threat assessments in multiple forums (among NWS, and between NWS and NNWS) is an effective risk reduction tool which works better the longer and more regularly the exchange is maintained. Ad hoc dialogues on doctrines can help clarify immediate concerns, especially in the context of recent posture changes or modernisation plans. However, **dialogue tools**

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25 Marion Messmer, research interview with NATO official, May 2018.

26 Sebastian Brixey-Williams, *ibid.*

27 For comparison, see Sarah Bidgood's similar recommendation for bilateral consultations on risk assessment between the US and Russia: Sarah Bidgood, "Risky Business: Four Ways to Ease U.S.-Russian Nuclear Tension" (Arms Control Today, September 2019) <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-09/features/risky-business-four-ways-ease-us-russian-nuclear-tension>

**generally tend to be more effective the longer they run regularly and without interruption.** If

participants meet regularly, it provides an opportunity to reduce levels of mistrust, to fully comprehend the other's mindset on strategic matters and it carries the potential to eventually increase confidence and predictability.

- **Increasing predictability in the strategic relationship reduces the risk of escalation through misperception as states will be more aware of what to expect from others.** Several risk reduction measures can have this result: greater transparency, intelligence sharing, as well as regular and sustained dialogues on postures or between military leaders, can all result in greater predictability. If several of these risk reduction measures are pursued, they can have a cumulative effect on the level of predictability in the relationship. Including dialogue on the strategic utility of dual-capable systems and how they are used can also have a stabilising effect. Time is also an important element here: the **longer certain risk reduction measures are going on, the more likely they are to increase predictability and have a stabilising effect.**

## Policy recommendations at a glance

- Increase strategic empathy through dialogue on risk assessments, postures and doctrines. This has value within NATO but also in a P5 context.
- Ensure that dialogue is sustained over time and is not used as a reward for good behaviour.
- Establish a regional European risk reduction centre to monitor and verify nuclear and cyber risks. This should happen in partnership with Russia.
- Enable blue skies thinking on the future of arms control by advancing the technical foundation of cyber security and verification. An obvious avenue for this is further collaboration between states with and without nuclear weapons, in the model of the UK-Norway collaboration.
- Increase predictability through better understanding, intelligence sharing and military-to-military dialogue.
- Integrate feedback and learning from these initiatives into policy work more widely so as to share any gains in predictability and trust across actors beyond those who are directly involved.

# Conclusion

Risk reduction has deservedly received a large amount of attention from a diverse range of actors across states and NGOs in this NPT Review Cycle. Implementing risk reduction measures can have a stabilising effect in an uncertain time. Additionally, many risk reduction steps can be taken immediately without necessitating further changes to the security environment or conducting long negotiations.

The risk reduction agenda can also play an important role in exploring avenues of where to go next with arms control. It is clear that arms control is changing, but it is less clear what it will look like in the future as historic treaties are ceasing to exist and traditional treaty approaches are being called in question.<sup>28</sup> Keeping in mind arms control's function as a risk reduction measure, we can begin to discuss which risk reduction steps in the future could fulfill a similar role of creating parity in numbers, or implementing verification regimes.

If we seize this opportunity and invest in communication channels across the board and over time, addressing key current contentious issues around threat assessments, doctrines, and understandings of strategic stability, then this could have a long-term beneficial effect on stabilising the relationship between NATO and Russia. However, it is important to acknowledge that political will is crucial in implementing risk reduction measures, especially when it comes to maintaining dialogue over a longer period of time. Risk reduction can only be effective if all actors have a genuine interest in reducing risks to create space for more positive engagement.

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28 Dick Zandee, "The Future of Arms Control and ConfidenceBuilding Regimes" Carnegie Europe, (28 Nov 2019) <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/11/28/future-of-arms-control-and-confidence-building-regimes-pub-80427>









- BASIC promotes meaningful dialogue amongst governments and experts in order to build international trust, reduce nuclear risks, and advance disarmament. Since 1987, we have developed a global reputation for convening empathic dialogues that help states acknowledge and overcome complex strategic and political differences.

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