PERCEPTIONS IN THE EURO-ATLANTIC

NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION POLICY BRIEF NO. 3

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Nuclear risk reduction efforts in the Euro-Atlantic should begin with the Russian Federation and the United States ensuring they retain what is left of nuclear arms control and transparency.
- Activities to increase transparency and verification, even absent specific treaties, are possible and essential to reducing risk perception asymmetries and could create a modicum of trust needed for more ambitious cooperative undertakings.
- Sustained efforts to address risks inherent to military accidents and to better understand one another's nuclear doctrines constitute necessary means of trust-building, especially in the context of the strategic competition between the Russian Federation and the United States.

CONTEXT

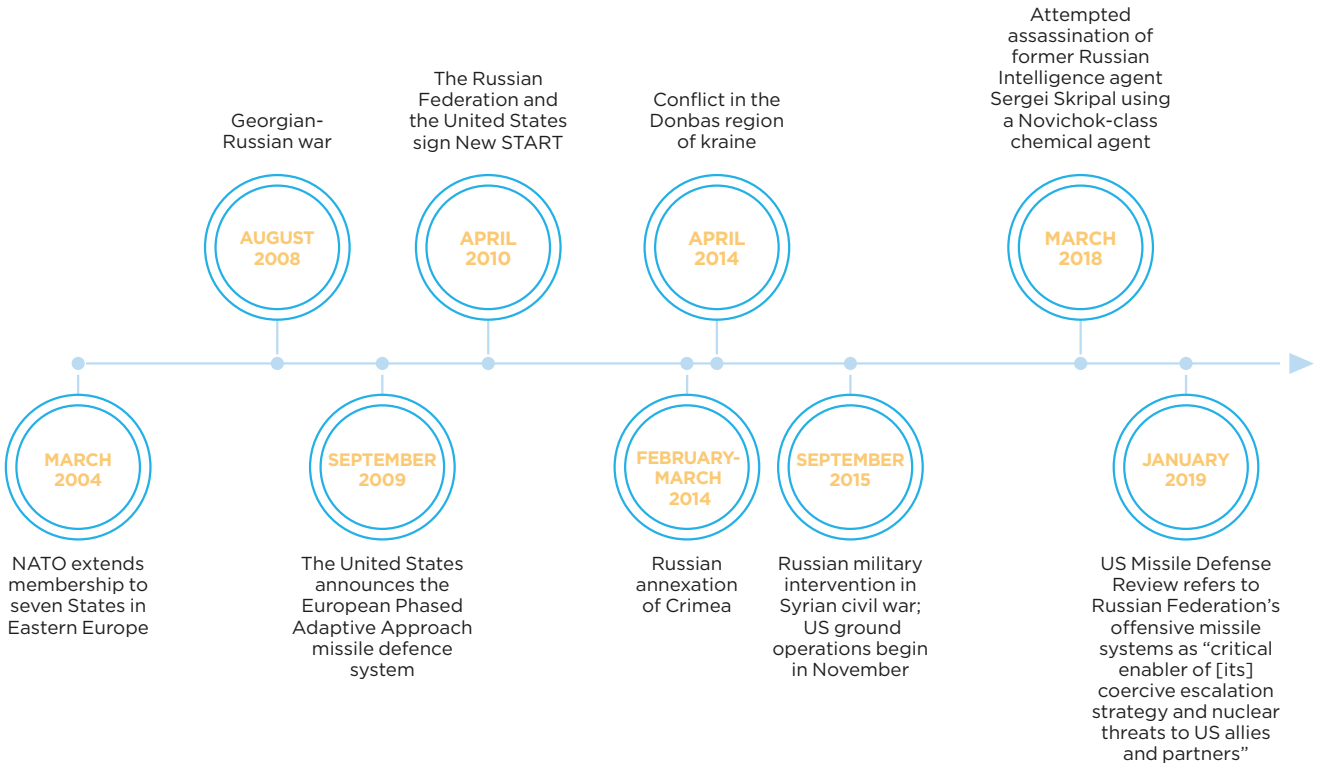
Risk of nuclear weapon use—be it deliberate use in an escalating crisis or war, in accordance with circumstances set out in nuclear doctrines, or due to inadvertent events—has grown in the Euro-Atlantic, mainly as a function of the resurgent strategic competition between the Russian Federation and the United States. Asymmetries in risk perceptions and developments in military capabilities are driving real and perceived insecurities. In this tense environment, (mis)interpretation of nuclear doctrines, coupled with poor risk analysis, could become self-fulfilling prophecies. This policy brief discusses sources of political volatility, outlines some of the risk drivers, and suggests measures in support of nuclear risk reduction in the Euro-Atlantic.

AGAINST A VOLATILE BACKDROP

Political volatility in the Euro-Atlantic impacts all levels of competition. Contributing to this in the last decade has been the reoccurrence of war within the region and at its periphery (see timeline). These events—in particular the Georgian–Russian war of 2008, the Russian annexation of Crimea coupled with Moscow's involvement in the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine since 2014, and the Russian Federation's continued military intervention in the civil war in the Syrian Arab Republic since 2015—have led NATO members and the European Union to perceive the Russian Federation as a general threat and to implement political, economic and military countermeasures. Consequently, a new front-line zone reminiscent of the Cold War has emerged, marked by belligerent rhetoric, more frequent acts of military brinkmanship (behaviour aimed to intimidate) on both sides, outsized military exercises, and diplomatic disengagement.[1]

Additionally, weapons of mass destruction play a prominent role in the strategic competition. Nuclear arms have regained political centrality in the dealings between NATO, the Russian Federation and the United States; rhetorical nuclear threats from Moscow accompanied the Crimean crisis in 2014.[2] Citing concerns about Russian non-compliance, the United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in 2019. The United States has also deployed lower-yield nuclear weapons on ballistic missile submarines operating in the Euro-Atlantic area. Meanwhile, like the United States, the Russian Federation has pursued an ambitious nuclear modernization programme (see Policy Briefs no. 1 and 2). With the US-Russian arms control relationship in retreat removing further forums for regular engagement, the lack of political self-restraint and interrelated current rearmament efforts on both sides feed into risk perceptions.

Key Events in the Euro-Atlantic



[1] OSCE Network, *Reducing the Risks of Conventional Deterrence in Europe. Arms Control in the NATO–Russia Contact Zones*, 2018, https://osce-network.net/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RISK_SP-fin.pdf.

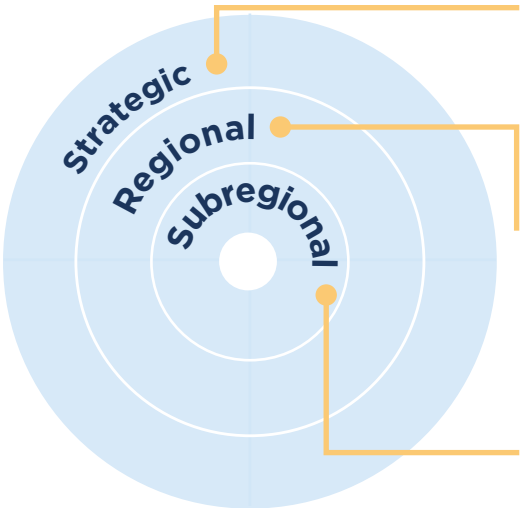
[2] A. Anishchuk, "UPDATE 1-Don't Mess with Nuclear Russia, Putin Says", Reuters, 29 August 2014, https://uk.reuters.com/article/russia-putin-conflict-idUKL5N0QZ3HC20140829.

RISK DRIVERS

Asymmetric Risk Perceptions

States in the Euro-Atlantic perceive risk differently, including its level, and this affects their relations across all levels of engagement. These asymmetries have initiated changes to politics, doctrines and postures, driving adversarial reactions that perpetuate the cycle. For the Russian Federation, US investment in missile defences (following the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002) and build-up of high-precision strike capabilities suggest potential US advantages in escalatory scenarios; Moscow has developed a host of sophisticated second-strike assets in response and has improved its own precision-strike capabilities.[3] For the United States and its NATO allies, the purposeful ambiguity of the Russian Federation about its capabilities—including its arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons—and acts of intimidation and brinkmanship raise concerns about limited war scenarios.[4] NATO has increased its readiness levels, added more exercises and mirrored brinkmanship behaviour over the Baltic and Black Seas.

Levels of Competition in the Euro-Atlantic



- **Actors:** The Russian Federation and the United States
- **Means:** Nuclear and conventional arms modernization and deployments, economic coercion, rhetorical threats

- **Actors:** States + transnational and supranational actors (e.g. NATO, European Union, CSTO, Customs Union)
- **Means:** Deterrence relationships, organizational influence

- **Actors:** *Baltics:* Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russian Federation; *Black Sea:* Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine
- **Means:** Open warfare, protracted conflict

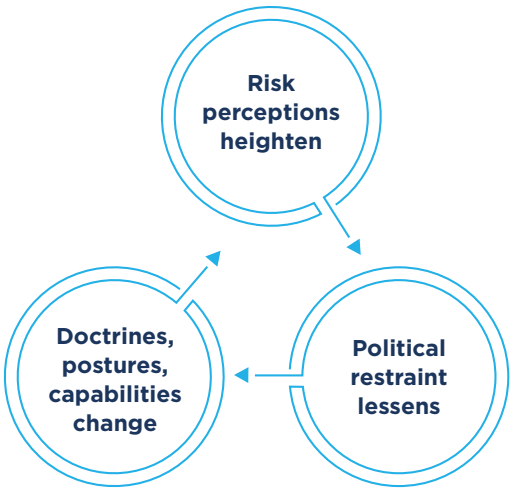
[3] D. Stefanovich, "New Russian Second Strike Systems", presentation, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, University of Hamburg, 20 August 2019, https://ifsh.de/file/person/Stefanovich_New_Russian_2nd_Strike_IFSH.pdf.

[4] U. Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: A NATO Playbook*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/28/preventing-escalation-in-baltics-nato-playbook-pub-75878; T. Frear, L. Kulesa and I. Kearns, *Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014*, Policy Brief, European Leadership Network, 2014, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/dangerous-brinkmanship-close-military-encounters-between-russia-and-the-west-in-2014.

Doctrinal Interpretation

Nuclear concerns are often fuelled by assumptions of the other side's secret strategies and alleged ambitions, a product of the current ambiguities in the relations between States. The US security establishment is convinced that the Russian Federation has an "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine, which foresees early escalatory use of nuclear weapons in a sub-regional conflict in support of offensive conventional Russian military actions.[5] While Russian officials have tried to dispel these concerns, the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review recommended the development and deployment of new sea-based tactical nuclear arms to counter the alleged doctrine.[6] Meanwhile, parts of the Russian security establishment, including President Vladimir Putin, seem convinced that the United States is striving for nuclear primacy.[7] The focus in the Russian Federation's strategic modernization drive on force survivability and effective penetration appear motivated, at least in part, by fears the United States will become less vulnerable and thus less deterred.[8] Such interpretations—drawn from prevailing perceptions of risk— have affected doctrine and posture, even if these concerns are denied by official documents and statements.

Sgt. Kirstin Merrimarahajara/Public Domain



Misguided Analysis

Prevailing State perceptions are at least partly linked to fixations developed both with their own (potential) insecurities relative to the other side, and high-impact scenarios that stretch plausibility. In interpreting the actions of 'the Other' and security risks to States, influential individuals in semi- or quasi-official positions in think tanks, academia or military institutes in both East and West often securitize the object of analysis, over-fixating on (potential) insecurities and prescribing military countermeasures as an omnipotent cure.[9] In so doing, these strategists often miss connecting strategic means and ends when assessing strategic plausibility – for instance, overlooking the "use it or lose it" pressure that would likely follow from the allegedly secret strategies and ambitions. Poor analytic predictions, including about the circumstances of the early use of nuclear arms in a crisis, could well induce exactly that behaviour—perhaps even by the side that wanted to prevent such outcome in the first place. Overall, misreading the red lines and employment tactics of the other side altogether might have catastrophic consequences in a crisis.

[5] A. Loukianova Fink, "The Evolving Russian Concept of Strategic Deterrence: Risks and Responses", *Arms Control Today*, vol. 47, no. 6, 2017; M. Kroenig, "Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War", *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2015; B. Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, Stanford University Press, 2015.

[6] US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review 2018*, February 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL.REPORT.PDF; "US Claims on Russia's 'Escalation for De-escalation' Doctrine are Wrong – Envoy", TASS, 9 April 2019, https://tass.com/politics/1052755.

[7] "If we do not do something [against US missile defence], eventually this will result in the complete devaluation of Russia's nuclear potential. Meaning that all of our missiles could simply be intercepted." See V. Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly", Moscow, 1 March 2018, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957.

[8] On Russian doctrine, see President of the Russian Federation Executive Order, Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, 8 June 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094.

[9] See footnote 21 in U. Kühn, "Nuclear Risk in the Euro-Atlantic", in *Nuclear Risk Reduction: Closing Pathways to Use*, Wilfred Wan (ed.), UNIDIR, 2020. https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/20/NRR/01.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reduce Risk Perception Asymmetries

Preserve Arms Control. Current rearmament efforts on both sides might eventually generate a more commonly shared interest in tackling mutual insecurities by way of diplomacy, restraint and transparency. In the meantime, the Russian Federation and the United States should retain what they can of the arms control order, as the unparalleled decay in cooperative security institutions is already negatively affecting the wider region. Both sides should extend the New START agreement before it expires in February 2021. The United States announced in May 2020 its intent to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty; still, States should look to preserve and reinvigorate this multiparty verification and transparency instrument.

Pursue Transparency and Verification Measures. Even absent treaties, proposals exist to address concerns about specific capabilities, including regarding non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe on both sides, or by opening US Aegis Ashore missile defence sites in Romania and Poland to Russian experts.[10] States could begin more modestly by reducing ambiguity without the provision of direct access to what they may consider sensitive information. States that have hosted tactical nuclear weapons could declare unused sites as training grounds for multiparty transparency exercises, as Kazakhstan has done in the past. Or, following the initiative by French President Emmanuel Macron in late 2019 to consider a Russian proposal for a nuclear missile moratorium, States could take concrete measures for verifying the absence of nuclear warheads in a post-INF environment.[11] These activities can help rebuild the prerequisite minimum trust needed for future more ambitious undertakings.

Enhance Mutual Understandings

Exchange on Doctrines. It will not be possible to entirely understand all aspects of 'the Other's' nuclear doctrine. Yet the current level of ambiguity in the US-Russian relationship is already triggering nuclear modernization and the development of novel weapons systems on both sides, and could heighten nuclear risk in a rapidly escalating crisis if each side operates on false assumptions. US-Russian working group meetings on nuclear doctrines and warheads as part of New START talks in Vienna in August 2020 and Helsinki in October 2020 represented a positive step. But regular doctrinal seminars—in addition to ongoing discussions in the "P5 Process"—could help address some of the most pressing insecurities surrounding the Russian and US doctrines. Such exchanges could be conducted under the auspices of the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, given that both organizations comprise all the relevant actors of the region, including those States with extended nuclear deterrence assurances from the United States. Whatever the institutional set-up, an open, regular and sustained exchange is critical.

[10] P. Ingram and O. Meier (eds), *Reducing the Role of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Perspectives and Proposals on the NATO Policy Debate*, Arms Control Association and British American Security Information Council, 2011, https://www.armscontrol.org/system/files/Tactical_Nuclear_Report_May_11.pdf; A. Zagorski, *Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Posture, Politics and Arms Control*, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, University of Hamburg, 2011, https://ifsh.de/pdf/publikationen/hb/hb156.pdf; H. Kristensen et al., "Preserving the INF Treaty", Deep Cuts Commission, 24 April 2017, http://deepcuts.org/files/pdf/Special_Brief_-_Deep_Cuts_INF.pdf.

[11] L. Hemicker and M. Wiegel, "Macron kommt Russland bei tomraketen entgegen", *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 27 November 2019, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/macron-will-putins-angebot-fuer-raketen-moratorium-pruefen-16506811.html.

Expand Communication and Information-Sharing. Risks of accidental nuclear weapon use – and inadvertent use more broadly – cannot be addressed using deterrence mechanisms. These use pathways require additional mutual communication and information-sharing. Revisiting risk reduction agreements from the Cold War, such as the Incidents at Sea Accords and Dangerous Military Activities Agreements, could alleviate some of the prevailing concerns about the consequences of military accidents. States could also strive for the establishment of subregional risk reduction centres (e.g. in the Baltics and the Black Sea regions). Such centres could, for instance, house military liaison officers and be tasked with military data exchange upon the request of interested parties. This would provide a venue for further subregional confidence- and security-building measures and, owing to their multilateral set-up, prevent NATO States from being singled out in their security relations with the Russian Federation and other States.

Improve Risk Analysis

Acknowledging the subjective nature of risk analysis and the driving role of perceptions and emotions (rather than what is ideally called "a sober or rational assessment") is a good starting point for arriving at a more modest and realistic understanding of how fuzzy political risk analysis often is. Policymaking and expert communities would do well to encourage historians, scholars, scientists, and nuclear and strategic studies experts to work together, taking into account knowledge about the region's history or culture, and shifting away from unitary, technocratic or simplistic suggested policy responses. Low-attention scenarios might harbour unexplored and underappreciated escalation pathways. More responsible risk analyses will also have to balance the need for strategic forecasting with an inclination to securitize each and every aspect of international affairs.

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Acronyms

ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile (Treaty)
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (Treaty)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
START	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty

About this brief

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