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Nuclear arms control shaken by new instability

Russia and NATO feel increasingly threatened by each other, a situation that seriously endangers decades-old arms control agreements

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The nuclear deterrence relationship between the West and Russia is becoming increasingly unstable. Driven by mutual perceptions of insecurity, both are about to enter a new arms race. The main problem is that each side is entertaining very different threat perceptions on very different levels of military competition. This situation heightens the risk of a complete breakdown of the bilateral nuclear arms control architecture.

Vladimir Putin's state-of-the-nation speech in March 2018 made three things abundantly clear. First, the Russian leadership is deeply concerned with US strategic missile defence. This particular Russian paranoia dates back at least to the Reagan years of the early 1980s, and gained momentum when Washington withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2001. Russia has strong and irrational fears that its strategic second-strike capability could be dramatically impaired. Moscow has also quite warranted fears that Washington’s edge in military technology will only accelerate in the coming years.

Second, President Putin's speech underlined how Russia is a firm believer in nuclear deterrence and its ultimate peace-preserving function. Third, the speech showed that Russia views nuclear weapons as a compensatory element against the backdrop of an otherwise very strong power imbalance vis-à-vis Washington. Summing up, Russia's deterrence concerns are mainly at the strategic nuclear level.

Regional instability dominates NATO’s

fears

For NATO and the US, the situation is quite different. Only recently, the Pentagon released the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), outlining Washington's future nuclear strategy. The NPR highlights America's concerns about the regional and sub-regional imbalances in Eastern Europe. The paper makes clear that the US sees Russia as being quantitatively superior, particularly given Russia's vast arsenal of tactical nuclear arms. This assessment is not new. The paper also reveales fears that Russia's presumed doctrine of 'escalate to de-escalate' could give Moscow a decisive advantage in any regional conflict with NATO. This doctrine – controversial because unproven – is also nothing new.

Yet, what is new is that Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russian interference in the US election campaign of 2016 have led the US and NATO to increasingly see Russia as a rival and a 'challenge to the Alliance'. Moreover, NATO is now seriously concerned with the defence of the Baltic States, having concluded from scenario planning that the Baltics could not be defended under current circumstances. This is why the Nuclear Posture Review proposes the introduction of sea-based tactical nuclear weapons.

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This way, Washington is bypassing potentially difficult and lengthy discussions within NATO. It also indicates that the US no longer has complete confidence in NATO's forward-deployed nuclear systems in Europe. The upcoming NATO summit in Brussels, on 11/12 July 2018, will clarify whether most of the Alliance members share America's risk assessment and whether they will agree to update NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review. In conclusion, the concerns of the US and parts of NATO lie mainly at the regional – and thus the nuclear-tactical – level.

Mutual fears fall on deaf ears

Poor communication between the two sides is creating a powerful incentive to embark on a new rearmament process. This raises the question: how aware is each side of the other's threat perceptions? Western fears – for example that Russia could attack the Baltics or could coerce NATO with its nuclear forces in a crisis – are often vilified by Russians as 'scare tactics'. On the other hand, the US stopped taking seriously Russia's fears about strategic instability a long time ago.

This situation is compounded by the absence of a regular strategic dialogue. The resulting misunderstandings and misinterpretations can well be tolerated in peacetime. But what would happen in an acute military crisis?

Could nuclear arms control soon be dead?

The ABM Treaty has been history since 2002, and another extremely important arms control treaty may soon be dead as well. Since 2014, the US has publicly accused the Russians of violating the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), an accord that lead to the elimination of all ground-launched missiles and launchers with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. For a long time, INF was considered the cornerstone of European security. However, now that the US is accusing Moscow of having flight-tested and possibly deployed a prohibited ground-launched cruise missile, the West should ask: what are the targets of those missiles – which might well reach all of Europe?

Russia has countered the American accusation with its own allegations. The most substantial allegations are linked to the US-operated missile defence systems in Romania and Poland. According to Moscow, only minor software changes are needed to convert these defensive systems into offensive systems for land-based cruise missiles. If this were true, the Western side would also be very close to violating the treaty.

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Attempts by Washington to clarify the matter with Moscow have not yielded any tangible results. Meanwhile, the US Congress is moving forward with its own INF policy. In late 2017, the Pentagon was commissioned to start a military research and development programme on an INF-busting conventional missile. It remains unclear what the end of this effort could be. Ultimately, the US could officially withdraw from the treaty and produce new ground-launched cruise missiles.

If the current crisis with Russia continues or if Europe's security situation deteriorates further, even a renewed discussion about the deployment of such weapons in Europe is conceivable. As things stand, Europe could then find itself back in the early 1980s.

Arms control advocates may be placing their last hopes in the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) agreement, which limits the strategic systems of the US and Russia with ranges beyond 5,500 kilometres. The treaty is set to expire in 2021 and its future is uncertain. US President Donald Trump apparently rejects a one-time extension of the treaty for another five years, perhaps because New START is an achievement of the previous Obama administration.

For the first time now, Moscow is also expressing public concerns about New START. Recently, Vladimir Ermakov, director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department of Non-Proliferation and Arms Control, indirectly accused the US of violating the treaty. In his view, an extension of New START would only be possible if Washington fully complied with the spirit and letter of the treaty. It seems as if Russia intends to publicly accuse the US of non-compliance with the treaty. If New START expires without an extension or a follow-up agreement, this would mean the end of US-Russian nuclear arms control – something the world has not seen in nearly 50 years.

Old problems, but new rules?

New regulatory approaches are urgently required to address the new instability. But this would be difficult for several reasons. First, there is the emerging instability in the deterrence relationship between the West and Russia. As mentioned above, Moscow and Washington are plagued by quite different concerns on different levels of military competition. Yet, there is an upside to that. Both sides are seriously worried. In theory, this opens the door for traditional quid pro quo approaches.

Any new approach should start from the insight that we are not short of good proposals. What is missing is political will and, perhaps more importantly, a modicum of respect.

But would it be possible to forge a comprehensive arms control deal? A deal that trades Russia's tactical superiority – at least in Europe – for binding limitations on America's strategic missile defence programmes? Politically and technically, this seems unlikely.

Instead of one single package deal, the sides should first agree on small and incremental steps. This could begin with the resumption of a regular US-Russian dialogue on strategic stability, including a mutual threat assessment. Particularly at the military level, permanently operating channels of communication must be available. This is especially important given the risk of accidental escalation.

Both sides should also become active on risk reduction measures. For Russia, that could mean halting its high-risk military manoeuvres over the Baltic and Black Seas. NATO could encourage countries like Poland or the Alliance's three Baltic member states to seek bilateral agreements with Moscow to prevent military incidents. Most NATO countries already do have such agreements with Russia in place.

Preventing a complete breakdown

As regards INF, certain solutions to the crisis are conceivable. Russia could well provide for transparency in response to the Western accusations, for example by demonstrating the fuel tank capacity of the missile identified by the Americans. In return, Washington could be transparent about the defence systems stationed in Poland and Romania.

At least as important would be openly addressing the threat of total loss of mutual transparency and verifiability, should bilateral nuclear arms control completely fail. For too long, both sides have only stood by as arms control agreements have withered away.. In order to get out of the mutual security dilemma, both sides must act now.

Any new approach should start from the insight that we are not short of good proposals. What is missing is political will and, perhaps more importantly, a modicum of respect. That means, respecting the security concerns of the other side; respecting that mutual nuclear deterrence contains a number of inherent risks; and respecting the fact that arms control can help stabilize the current situation.



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