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Rising Nuclear Dangers: Steps to Reduce Risks in the Euro-Atlantic Region

SUMMARY

International statesmen Des Browne, Wolfgang Ischinger, Igor Ivanov, and Sam Nunn call on Western and Russian leaders to take immediate steps to reduce the risk of a dangerous military confrontation. This report offers recommendations to avoid accidents, enhance predictability, and build confidence.

Foreword by Des Browne, Wolfgang Ischinger, Igor Ivanov, and Sam Nunn
By Robert E. Berls, Jr., and Leon Ratz

About the Nuclear Threat Initiative

The Nuclear Threat Initiative works to protect our lives, environment, and quality of life now and for future generations. We work to prevent catastrophic attacks with weapons of mass destruction and disruption (WMDD)—nuclear, biological, radiological, chemical, and cyber. Founded in 2001 by former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn and philanthropist Ted Turner, NTI is guided by a prestigious, international board of directors. Sam Nunn serves as chief executive officer; Des Browne is vice chairman; and Joan Rohlfing serves as president. Learn more at www.nti.org.

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Foreword

Russia and the West are at a dangerous crossroads. During the past several years, we have been in a state of escalating tension, trapped in a downward spiral of antagonism and distrust. With our militaries moving closer—in the skies over the Baltic Sea, in the depths of the North Atlantic, and across the Middle East—the risks of miscalculation or accident and escalation are unacceptably high. Unless Western and Russian leaders take immediate steps to improve transparency and enhance predictability, they may inadvertently risk a deadly confrontation.

This paper, which is based on a survey of leading defense and security experts from the United States, Russia, and Europe, puts forward nine urgent and practical recommendations to ensure that we avoid the worst kind of catastrophe: a nuclear incident involving NATO and Russian forces. The measures are focused on preventing accidents, enhancing predictability, and building confidence. These include recommendations to fly military aircraft with transponders turned on, to establish “safe distance” protocols for ships and aircraft, to demonstrate restraint in military exercises, and to improve transparency for deployments of both missile and missile defense systems.

Perhaps most importantly, this paper recommends that Western and Russian leaders initiate a dialogue focused on strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction. Dialogue should never be seen as a sign of weakness—it is essential for nuclear risk reduction to protect our citizens. Military-to-military discussions should be at the top of the list of near-term steps to reduce risk.

Even during the darkest days of the Cold War, we maintained robust channels of communication to prevent nuclear accidents, miscalculations, or nuclear escalation. Today, nearly all of these channels have eroded, and our political and military leaders seldom talk to one another. Simply put, it is national security malpractice that today we have virtually no dialogue among our capitals on reducing nuclear risks. This must change.

Absent engagement, nuclear risks will only continue to increase, endangering all of us. The time to act on our common security interests is now.

Des Browne, Nuclear Threat Initiative,
European Leadership Network

Igor Ivanov, Russian International Affairs Council

Wolfgang Ischinger, Munich Security Conference

Sam Nunn, Nuclear Threat Initiative

The four were co-chairs of Building Mutual Security, a Track II dialogue and report that proposed a new approach to security in the Euro-Atlantic region and addressed the most significant obstacle: a corrosive lack of trust, fueled by historical animosities and present uncertainties in the European and global security landscape.

Perhaps most importantly, this paper recommends that Western and Russian leaders initiate a dialogue focused on strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction.

Introduction

The risk of a deadly miscalculation or accident involving Western or Russian armed forces continues to rise. With political tensions being this high and absent robust channels of communication, nearly every close encounter between NATO and Russian military assets carries an unacceptable risk of escalation.

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Last year, in *Rising Nuclear Dangers: Assessing the Risk of Nuclear Use in the Euro-Atlantic Region*, the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) described a combination of factors that contributed to the likelihood of accident or miscalculation that could lead to nuclear use. The list included:

- A severe deficit of trust,
- Irreconcilable narratives and threat perceptions,
- Domestic political imperatives,
- Broken channels of communication,
- Alliance politics,
- Failing safeguards to prevent nuclear use,
- Conventional force disparity, and
- Eroding nuclear expertise.

Unfortunately, one year later, these factors have persisted or have gotten worse, while safeguards to prevent escalation are still not in place. Consequently, the risk of nuclear use, particularly as a result of accident or miscalculation, continues to rise and is now higher than any period since the end of the Cold War.

Earlier this year, NTI surveyed a group of leading experts¹ from the United States, Russia, and Europe on measures that could be taken to reduce the risk of miscalculation or accident. The experts proposed a range of options, some feasible in the short term but others impractical under the current political circumstances. This paper puts forth those proposals that could realistically be implemented in the first few months of 2017, if the political will exists in Moscow and Western capitals. These proposals are grouped under three broad objectives: preventing accidents, enhancing predictability, and building confidence. Achieving these objectives will neither restore trust nor resolve the many profound differences between Russia and the West. But doing so might avert the most significant consequences and would serve the national interests of all parties.

¹ The full list of surveyed experts can be found at the end of this paper.

Recommendations

Measures to Prevent Accidents

Moscow, Brussels, and Washington must take immediate steps to prevent accidents involving collisions of aircraft or naval vessels and stop irresponsible or accidental incursions into sovereign territory. The following measures are intended to minimize such risks.

1. Require all military aircraft to fly with transponders turned on.

U.S. and NATO officials should reconsider their September 2016 decision to reject a Russian proposal requiring all military aircraft flying over the Baltic Sea to fly with their transponders turned on.² According to press reports, NATO officials rebuffed the Russian proposal citing Moscow's refusal to consider measures to limit dangerous military exercises. The two issues should not be linked. Achieving an agreement on aircraft incident prevention, particularly in the Baltic Sea and the Nordic region, would represent important progress on risk reduction. Skepticism regarding Russian implementation is warranted—but the absence of such an agreement is inherently dangerous. The agreement should include a dispute settlement mechanism, such as a standing Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) staffed by Russian and NATO personnel, which could help resolve disputes and become a platform for information exchange. The October 2015 agreement between the United States and Russia on “de-confliction” of military operations over Syria, which remains in effect, could serve as a model for aircraft incident prevention talks between officials from the United States, NATO, and Russia.

2. Agree on a “safe distance limitation” on U.S. and Russian aircraft and ships in international airspace and waters.

Although existing treaties between Moscow and Washington require naval vessels to “remain well clear [of one another] to avoid risk of collision” and aircraft are instructed to “use the greatest caution and prudence in approaching aircraft of the other Party,” the United States and Russia have not agreed on parameters for how close their ships and planes can approach one another.³ This is, in part, due to practical military requirements for routine objectives that are often mission-dependent. However, repeated incidents of close military encounters involving U.S. and Russian aircraft and vessels in international airspace and waters necessitate extraordinary measures to avoid accidental collisions. Therefore, the United States and Russia

² Julian E. Barnes, “NATO Rejects Russian Air-Safety Proposal for Planes in Baltic Region,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 20, 2016, available at www.wsj.com/articles/nato-rejects-russian-air-safety-proposal-for-planes-in-baltic-region-1474391644.

³ These obligations are codified in two bilateral agreements: the 1972 Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On or Over the High Seas (commonly referred to as INCSEA) and the 1989 Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities (DMA). They are also mentioned in the multilateral 1972 International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (commonly referred to as the COLREGS or the naval “Rules of the Road”).

should hold a Special Review Meeting of the 1972 Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On or Over the High Seas to negotiate a “safe distance” limitation for ships and aircraft operating in near proximity of one another.⁴ Exceptions could be made for aircraft and vessels on declared intercept missions. Protocols should be established to expeditiously resolve disputes in the event of a violation. A similar agreement also should be implemented between NATO and Russian armed forces.

3. Restore U.S.-Russia and NATO-Russia military-to-military communication.

A lack of routine communication between military officials heightens distrust and increases the risk of miscalculation in the event of an accident or escalation. In 2014, NATO suspended all technical-level interactions with Russia under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Council, effectively neutering the Council’s ability to be used as a forum for crisis management or crisis avoidance. Likewise, since 2014 the United States and Russia terminated most military-to-military contacts following the start of the Ukraine conflict, except for exchanges of information related to the “de-confliction” agreement in Syria and those required by treaty (such as the INCSEA and the DMA agreements). To minimize risks of accident, the NATO-Russia Council should:

- Resume military-to-military contacts to create a technical-level forum for resolution of disputes on airspace or territorial waters violations,
- Resume notifications and briefings regarding military exercises (both planned and snap exercises), and
- Resume negotiation of other mechanisms to enhance crisis avoidance and crisis management.

Likewise, U.S. and Russian military commands should resume regular communication with the explicit objective of crisis avoidance, with a first step of initiating regular meetings of representatives of the Russian General Staff and the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff.

⁴ Although annual reviews of INCSEA continue to take place between U.S. and Russian naval representatives, more frequent reviews are permitted under Article IX of the treaty.

Measures to Enhance Predictability

The following measures are intended to help enhance predictability regarding military intentions and capabilities, as well as to improve transparency of military activities in order to minimize risk of miscalculation and dangerous escalation.

4. Address concerns about the deployment of nuclear-capable ballistic missile systems and missile defense systems in Europe.

In May 2016, the United States placed into operation the Aegis Ashore Ballistic Missile Defense System in Romania, with a similar system scheduled to be completed in Poland by 2018. In early October 2016, Russia deployed short-range, nuclear-capable Iskander-M ballistic missiles to its Kaliningrad enclave, with temporary deployments reported in 2014 and 2015. Officials in Western capitals and Moscow have accused each other of provocation with these deployments, calling such actions “destabilizing” or “escalatory.”⁵ Given the absence of trust that exists among all sides, particularly in the Baltic region, negotiators from NATO, Russia, and the United States should negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding concerning predictability and transparency of ballistic missile systems and missile defense systems in Europe. Specifically, the agreement should include transparency visits to missile defense sites, exchanges of information about capabilities of ballistic missile and ballistic missile defense systems, and a regular dialogue among officials and military experts regarding deployments of such systems.

Officials from NATO and Russia should negotiate a reduction in notification and observation thresholds for all military exercises.

5. Reduce notification and observation thresholds for all military exercises.

In light of increasing concerns about the scale and intention of military exercises in the Euro-Atlantic region, officials from NATO and Russia should negotiate a reduction in notification and observation thresholds for all military exercises, including snap exercises.⁶ Such a step would help improve military transparency and restore predictability regarding the intentions of such exercises. Importantly, agreement should be reached on inviting Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe observers no more than 24 hours after the start of a snap military exercise, lowering the current threshold from 72 hours. Moreover, the quotas on inspections and evaluations in the 2011 Vienna Document should be raised in order to help reduce concerns regarding unusual military activities.

⁵ Julian E. Barnes, “NATO Secretary General Says Russia’s Nuclear Threats Destabilizing,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2015, available at www.wsj.com/articles/nato-secretary-general-says-russias-nuclear-threats-destabilizing-1432740612.

⁶ Such thresholds are established by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) 2011 Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures.

6. Refrain from incorporating nuclear or nuclear-capable forces into military exercises.

In recent years, Russia has included nuclear or nuclear-capable forces in its large-scale military exercises, signaling (intentionally or otherwise) readiness for a nuclear confrontation with the West. Such moves are highly dangerous, creating strong incentives for reciprocal demonstrations of preparedness of nuclear forces, thereby heightening tensions and increasing the risk of miscalculation or accident. Consequently, all sides should commit to refrain from incorporating nuclear or nuclear-capable forces in military exercises. Such a commitment could be enshrined in a Memorandum of Understanding between NATO and Russia, which could be renewed every year.

Measures to Build Confidence

The following measures are intended to build confidence at multiple levels (political elites, military personnel, and the general public) regarding the strategic intentions of each side—with a view to reduce domestic political imperatives seeking further escalation and confrontation.

7. Jointly reaffirm at the highest political levels that “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”

U.S. President Ronald Reagan introduced the phrase during his 1984 State of the Union Address, a statement that he reaffirmed the following year jointly with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev during a bilateral summit in Geneva. This phrase has taken on renewed significance in light of heightened tensions between the United States and Russia and should be reaffirmed by its leaders as soon as possible. The general public in both countries should be reassured that neither side seeks war, that its leaders recognize the dangers inherent in further escalation, and that they will take measures to minimize the risk of nuclear confrontation. Such declarations should be made at the presidential level, if possible, in order to have maximum effect in alleviating public concerns, tempering political imperatives that favor escalation, and creating an atmosphere that allows more substantive progress to be made on nuclear risk reduction and arms control.

Public officials and military leaders should refrain from making hyperbolic or aggressive statements regarding nuclear capabilities.

8. Stop reckless nuclear rhetoric.

Public officials and military leaders should refrain from making hyperbolic or aggressive statements regarding nuclear capabilities. Such statements are provocative, heighten distrust, and amount to reckless nuclear saber-rattling. There is a danger that charged political rhetoric with respect to nuclear weapons will influence policy, practice, and doctrine, thereby increasing the danger that nuclear weapons may more readily be employed in the event of a crisis. Moreover, as NTI described in *Rising Nuclear Dangers: Assessing the Risk of Nuclear Use in the Euro-Atlantic Region*, such rhetoric is particularly dangerous for a generation of political and military leaders with little

experience managing the brinksmanship of the Cold War—an experience that “made real” the consequences of escalation and that tempered reactions to provocations or accidents. Absent such experience, loose nuclear rhetoric becomes all the more dangerous, as it may lead to provocations, and heightens the risk of miscalculation.

9. Launch a high-level dialogue on strategic stability and nuclear risk reduction.

Irrespective of their profound differences, the United States and Russia bear a special responsibility to maintain dialogue and achieve progress on strategic stability. Beyond the confidence-building and other risk-reduction measures outlined in this paper, the two countries need to establish a channel of communication for discussing long-term complex issues affecting strategic stability, including disagreements regarding Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty compliance, missile defense, non-strategic nuclear weapons, and conventional (non-nuclear) strategic weapon systems such as Prompt Global Strike. It will take years to resolve such disputes, but establishing a high-level channel of communication dedicated to these issues is an important first step that could be implemented in the coming months.

Conclusion

As disagreements between Russia and the West multiply and deepen, both sides should ensure that such differences have minimal effect on nuclear risks. Unfortunately, to date, neither has achieved meaningful progress in reducing these risks. The steps outlined in this paper can reduce the likelihood of accident, enhance predictability, and build confidence—but, to be implemented, they require the political will of those in Moscow and Western capitals. The time for prudence is now.

Survey Respondents

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Stephen J. Blank, Senior Fellow, U.S. Army War College*

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Nikolas Gvosdev, Professor, U.S. Naval War College*

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Jacob Kipp, Adjunct Professor, University of Kansas

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The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the experts listed above, nor the institutions with which they are affiliated.

**Participated in his personal capacity.*

About the Authors

Foreword

Des Browne (Lord Browne of Ladyton) is Vice Chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative. The former U.K. Secretary of State for Defence also served as Convener for both the European Leadership Network and the Top Level Group of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Disarmament and Non-Proliferation.

Wolfgang Ischinger is Chairman of the Munich Security Conference. The former German Ambassador to the United Kingdom and to the United States also served as the German Deputy Foreign Minister.

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Report

Robert E. Berls, Jr., is the Senior Advisor for Russia and Eurasia at the Nuclear Threat Initiative. A founding staff member at NTI, Berls has directed or helped manage all of NTI's projects in Russia addressing nuclear, chemical, and biological threats. From 2002 to 2009, Berls was the director of NTI's office in Moscow. His career spans military, government, academia, and business. He served for 26 years in the U.S. Air Force, rising to the rank of colonel. During the 1980s he served as air attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. He was special assistant to the Secretary of Energy for Russia/NIS programs during the first Clinton Administration. Berls holds a doctorate in Russian Area Studies from Georgetown University.

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