

U.S.-Russia Strategic Dialogue on Crisis Stability (2017–2018)

Final Report

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Summary

Between fall of 2017 and spring of 2018, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) hosted a strategic dialogue for U.S. and Russian experts focusing on crisis stability. The dialogue was initially conceived to ask how the evolution of technology, operational approaches, and policy affect crisis stability and what steps could be taken to enhance it given this evolving environment. However, the group's discussions revealed more fundamental concerns. While participants were generally confident that for the most part systems would "fail safe" and crises were unlikely to lead to inadvertent escalation, they were less certain that policymakers in either Moscow or Washington truly value both avoiding conflicts and preventing their escalation. This means that poor communication, confusing signaling, ambiguous declaratory policy, and increasing risk acceptance on both sides may lead to conflicts that, if not intentional, are perceived by leaders as manageable. However, the challenges of miscommunication, exacerbated by emerging technologies from cyber capabilities to information operations to autonomous weapons, could prove those leaders dangerously wrong.

The group was confident that if the desire exists, the two countries can and will find ways to prevent crisis escalation, particularly at early stages. Members also agreed that redundancy, routine, and depoliticization were critical to the success of these mechanisms. Ad hoc arrangements are much more likely to be preferred by officials today who have little appetite for new arms control arrangements.

Continuing dialogue among governmental and nongovernmental experts will be crucial to helping improve mutual capacity to recognize one another's positions and perspectives, even if disagreements persist, and find ways to prevent or limit crisis escalation. Despite many different viewpoints and, in some cases, interpretations of seemingly basic facts and realities, our group agreed that continued communication had to be a foundation for a way forward.

These conclusions were underscored by the real-world developments that shaped discussion during the course of the project. U.S.-Russian relations continued to worsen, particularly in light of

allegations of interference with the U.S. presidential election in 2016. Accusations of Russian government responsibility for the use of a chemical weapon in an attempted murder in Salisbury, England, and the imposition of additional sanctions on Russia by the United States and European countries created additional tensions. The U.S. bombing of Syrian military targets and the deaths of Russian contractors during an apparent attack on a U.S. military installation in that country raised concerns about escalation in that theater. Finally, the release of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review in February 2018 and President Putin's March 1 speech regarding Russia's new nuclear weapons programs raised new questions of how evolving strategies and force postures would affect crisis stability.

Approach

The dialogue centered around two workshops. Both brought together Russian and U.S. experts, with some government representatives also in attendance. For each workshop, CSIS commissioned papers and discussion points and circulated them in advance to create a baseline for discussion. Afterwards, we distributed summaries and findings among participants for review. The first workshop, held in Vienna, Austria, in October 2017, laid the groundwork for differentiating between crisis stability and strategic stability. In an environment of little trust, participants agreed it was important to preserve, review, and, where needed, adjust existing mechanisms to prevent and respond to crises as well as create new ones. At that workshop, participants considered specific scenarios of potential crisis escalation, including conventional provocations in the Baltic Sea, provocations (conventional and nuclear) from North Korea, and cyberattacks on U.S. early warning and missile systems. Specialists raised issues specific to space-based threats and capabilities and explored the role of cyber threats and cybersecurity in crisis stability. Despite the emphasis on crisis stability, arms control, its history, and its prospective future recurred as an underlying theme.

The second workshop, held in Washington, D.C., in March 2018, took shape from the experience of the first. Participants agreed to consider specifically how crisis stability could be increased in peacetime and in combat conditions through in-depth looks at the Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) agreement and deconfliction in Syria. The group asked to what extent and in what ways these experiences could serve as models for future collaboration. In addition, experts at the second workshop assessed the impact of technological change on crisis stability and the potential for future mechanisms to improve crisis stability. In particular, they hoped to identify whether crisis could be avoided and mitigated by managing nuclear and related weapons and technologies. In this light, they asked what might be included in a "shadow plan" for future arms control and confidence building.

This final report summarizes what we learned over the course of this dialogue.

Missing: An Intellectual Framework for Managing Risk?

A suspicion that both the United States and Russia had lost their desire to avoid crisis was a connecting thread running through our meetings. Participants argued that the fear of escalation, and, indeed, of nuclear conflict, that existed in the past has faded, and leaders in both countries appear to

see some value in provocation. Moreover, they believe that both the White House and the Kremlin are confident in their capacity to manage any crisis that might occur, even as they see the other country as risk-tolerant. One participant likened the situation to that of 1950–1961, when there were no real rules or agreements governing behavior.

If some aspects of the new situation harken to the past, others reflect new realities: in a peacetime context, both technology and decisionmaking in both countries tend toward a default of “failing safe” rather than toward escalation. This removes a substantial incentive to tamp down provocations and avoid crisis. Both our scenario exercises and subsequent discussion left participants feeling that it was unlikely that dangerous escalation would occur from a “zero-start.” Even in the face of calamitous accidents, technology failure, and in a general atmosphere of distrust, the experts around the table agreed that as long as the two countries are otherwise not in conflict, cooler heads will prevail to double-check and avoid rash responses. However, under conflict conditions, the equation would be different. If a conventional conflict begins, somewhere in Europe, for example, the absence of consistent and reliable mechanisms of communication, a lack of transparency, and worsening mutual understanding creates real and substantial risks of inadvertent escalation. This is exacerbated by any past nuclear “saber-rattling” that might lead officials to either seek to demonstrate their own credibility or to expect escalation, including possibly to nuclear weapon use, from the other state.

This logic led the group to assess the risk of crisis instability sparked by actions in the Baltics as quite low. Some, particularly Russian participants, were more worried about the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine: they worried that U.S. and Russian direct participation could increase until the two countries risked direct conflict. Syria, where both are currently operating combat forces, however, presented an example of adequate management. Group members speculated that this might reflect a somewhat surprising reality: wartime crisis stability may be easier to create than peacetime, perhaps because the stakes are higher. However, participants also agreed that Syria was a unique case: because U.S. and Russian forces are neither on the same nor on truly opposing sides, deconfliction is feasible in ways it would not be otherwise.

The dangers of crisis escalation are further exacerbated by the challenges presented by cyberthreats and in the space domain. Here, a large part of the problem lies in the absence of shared understandings of both countries’ thresholds and escalation ladders. In particular, the dependence of modern military forces on space-based assets means that disruptions in space have a huge potential impact in a crisis. The lack of legal limitations on deployment of weapons in space (apart from nuclear weapons) has Russia concerned about the potential use of space to launch a surprise attack. Other technical challenges for crisis stability include the development of new weapons technologies, including hypersonic weapons, whose warning and escalation implications remain unclear—and perhaps not even defined by those who would deploy the weapons.

While space threats and new weapons technologies can, to some extent, be bounded and discussed in and of themselves, by the end of the second workshop, experts agreed that cybersecurity must be integrated into broader crisis instability scenarios rather than treated separately. The conversation about cybersecurity remains complicated by the absence of shared definitions and concepts, even as cyberthreats and vulnerabilities, by various definitions, permeate any prospective crisis. While cyber-

only threats may exist, the integration of cyber into other realms creates very worrying implications. For instance, experts dismiss fears that nuclear command and control can be “hacked” including to begin a launch sequence, as beyond unlikely. But it is more plausible that an adversary could inject false data into one’s systems short of such an action. Thus, governments are right to worry about possible ways that security could be compromised.

In conventional scenarios, the use of private military contractors, who do not participate in deconfliction mechanisms and whose roles may not be fully clear, raises new questions for managing risks. Private-contractor actions, like cyber attacks, present unclear command chains and make attribution difficult, increasing the possibility that third parties may exploit tension—or be disingenuously blamed for actions. Finally, efforts to affect countries’ decisionmaking and politics via information campaigns, including those that exploit social media, present additional challenges in a crisis context and for crisis prevention.

The emerging environment of greater risk tolerance has also had an impact on doctrine and declaratory policy. Both Russia and the United States perceive the other as reckless in doctrine and statements. Russians see U.S. plans to develop new lower-yield nuclear capabilities, as described in the new Nuclear Posture Review issued in February 2018, as provocative—in line with what they describe as a history of interventionist, aggressive behavior. Many in the United States (including, according to the aforementioned U.S. nuclear posture review, the Pentagon) believe that Russia intends to use nuclear weapons early in a conflict, and argue that Russia seeks to use its nuclear arsenal to coerce other states. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s March 1, 2018, address to his parliament, with its substantial discussion of new weapons systems, was interpreted in that light—and as a direct threat to the United States.

In our discussions, Russians defended their government’s strategy as rooted in the threat of retaliation, and thus deterrence. They argued that Russia’s stated doctrine had a higher bar for nuclear weapons use than does that of the United States: limiting it to conditions of a threat to the existence of the state. They argued that U.S. statements, which use terms like “massive and immediate strategic effects,” are dangerously vague. Americans, for their part, emphasized Russian officials’ bellicose statements, as well as Moscow’s own interventions in Ukraine and Syria. Participants from both countries agreed that their leaders seek to take advantage of ambiguity. This led not a few to ask whether ambiguity is as beneficial as governments may believe—and to return to the question of whether the taboo on nuclear weapons use is fading in the minds of officials. Finally, these discussions underlined the danger that both experts and leaders may talk past one another, believing themselves to be sending clear signals when, in fact, their words and actions are open to misinterpretation. More communication, at all levels, is part of the solution to that problem, so that Russians and Americans both can better calibrate their messaging to one another.

Models for Future Behavior?

In the first workshop, experts asked what past experiences provided good models of crisis avoidance and crisis management that could be adapted to today’s environment. Two experiences, one older and one newer, were proposed and examined both in short discussion papers and around the table in

the second meeting. The first of these was the Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA), signed by the USSR and United States in 1972.

For decades, INCSEA has enabled Washington and Moscow to establish, follow, and consult on rules of behavior at sea in an effective and collegial forum. INCSEA continues to function effectively, as does the Dangerous Military Incidents agreement that followed it. This said, the evolution of practices and technologies creates new risks, which either INCSEA and its existing follow-ons or new arrangements could helpfully address. The group discussed the possibility of new arrangements to cover autonomous and remote-controlled aircraft, air forces-focused agreements, and cyberspace pacts (which might require a private-sector role). None of the participants thought developing arrangements in these spheres would be easy, due to the wealth of technical, attribution, and other challenges. Experts also agreed that naval culture may have something to do with INCSEA's success and questioned whether that could be extended to air forces or other spheres of interaction.

The fact that INCSEA was part of a summit process facilitated by Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev's goal of improving relations with the United States may further decrease the odds of additional agreements along these lines, given current tensions between U.S. and Russian leaders. This said, INCSEA followed many years of increasing hostility and dangerous activity. Today, it works because it is trusted and seen as necessary by both sides. Although some questioned whether Russia remained interested in limiting crisis escalation risks from dangerous incidents, the continued use of INCSEA mechanisms is a positive indicator.

The second, more recent model of interaction our group considered was deconfliction efforts between the U.S. and Russian militaries in Syria. After in-depth discussion at the second workshop, experts largely agreed that Syria deconfliction, while successful, is a model mainly in a general sense: it shows that systems can and will be put in place when both sides want them. The specific solutions found in Syria, however, are not easily transferrable elsewhere. The processes established make sense for the situation, which is in many ways *sui generis*, and this is appropriate. In Syria, the United States and Russia are both engaged in combat operations, but while they are far from allied, they are also not in conflict with one another. This makes a Syrian form of deconfliction possible. To put it bluntly, the bar is low: Rather than intelligence cooperation, or a shared strategy, the aim is simply to avoid and ameliorate dangerous incidents through deconfliction of operations. Indeed, some participants speculated that wartime deconfliction under these circumstances is actually more effective than peacetime deconfliction: the high stakes mean that serious problems are less likely to be politicized (even as less serious or even spurious disagreements might be exploited for political purposes). But if the specifics of Syria are not easily transferrable, experts largely agreed that some lessons can be taken. These include the importance of routinization and redundancy of communication. This lesson, of course, echoes that of INCSEA. Moreover, experts concluded that such communications, in peace and war, may work better when conducted by a mix of representatives of the diplomatic corps and military personnel. Counterparts are often able to speak each other's language, and respect each other as professionals, even when relations are tense, but a complicated political, economic, and military situation means that a range of professional expertise may need to be brought to bear.

Participants also injected a note of caution into this discussion of lessons from INCSEA and Syria, which is that both sets of mechanisms anticipate that accidents will happen, in wartime and peacetime, and that one needs tools such as these to ameliorate the aftereffects. This, however, may be somewhat specific to the conventional weapons realm: In the nuclear context, by contrast, there is little room for mistakes.

Agree on Agreements?

The arms control framework that exists today was created and evolved to manage the weapons of yesterday. While these still exist, and continue to threaten global survival, these threats are now exacerbated by new technologies. Emerging weapons, from drones to hypersonic vehicles, create novel and unexpected vulnerabilities on the one hand, and may make old perceptions of vulnerability less farfetched on the other. Meanwhile, emphasis on dual-use (nuclear and conventional) systems creates significant crisis stability concerns, as combatants may be uncertain as to the threat until a weapon has detonated. In an arms control context, such developments also make both control and verification more complex.

All of this said, technical solutions to problems such as these are possible and imaginable. They include limitations on destabilizing capabilities, central storage of, for example, nonstrategic nuclear weapons, and other ways arrangements specific to concerns. In the view of most of our experts, such arrangements are desirable. However, the political barriers to negotiating and implementing agreements, as well as the substantial loss of trust between the United States and Russia may make it impossible to move forward on this track in the foreseeable future. Thus, while at our first meeting some participants asked whether it made sense to scrap the existing arms control infrastructure and start from scratch, the absence of appetite for arms control in Moscow and Washington led most of the group to fear that there is little hope for new agreements or arrangements. The group largely agreed, therefore, that preserving existing arms control treaties would be critical for crisis stability. Among other things, at least some of the new technologies and systems will be bound by those, as long as those treaties stick around. For others, creative approaches might need to be sought.

To preserve the arms control framework that exists, Moscow and Washington must first and foremost resolve issues concerning the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Failure to do so and the collapse of the treaty would in the near term lead to further dramatic negative impact on relations between Russia and the West. In the medium term, it could undermine the extension of New START, leaving the United States and Russia without any strategic systems limits after 2021. Although meetings of this group concluded prior to the U.S. announcement of its decision to leave the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action for Iran in May 2018, not a few participants (both American and Russian) cautioned that such an action would further undermine trust in formal arrangements and governmental promises.

If treaty and executive commitments are neither trusted nor pursued, it is not just bilateral arms control that is in danger. The group discussed prospects for multinational voluntary commitments under agreements like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action for Iran or multilateral meetings such as the nuclear summits. But if such models are worthy of further discussion, they are also difficult to

effectively operationalize for the challenges that face Moscow and Washington. This would be true even if senior-level interest in mutual commitments existed. Since it appears not to exist, the questions of how negotiations and agreements, to say nothing of verification and transparency, would work become difficult to effectively address.

What, then, is possible? Some participants felt that capitals would eventually come back around to more traditional approaches. In the meantime, developing actionable plans to implement when that happens has a certain logic, although there was little consensus about what would be on the table, and open to discussion. While participants agreed that widening the aperture to include missile defense, advanced weapons, and perhaps hypersonics would be necessary, they also had a difficult time envisioning U.S. leaders agreeing to linkages of this sort, although in an environment in which they favored arms control in general, this calculus might change.

In light of these challenges and new environment, smaller-scale endeavors, such as confidence-building measures and unilateral actions may have renewed salience. From old plans for a joint early-warning center to deeper discussions about declaratory policy, the need to improve trust and mutual comprehension is clear. Clarifying thresholds for nuclear use, particularly in response to nonnuclear action, could also limit crisis risks, although it would cost governments some of the benefits they see in ambiguity. As discussed above, both U.S. and Russian doctrine are interpreted in destabilizing ways, and not consistently in line with either state's intentions. Further discussions, including at official levels, of these questions could help clarify perspectives and lower risk.

To counter the danger that nuclear weapons may be increasingly seen as plausible warfighting tools, rather than purely deterrent capabilities, some participants favored both countries declaring that their nuclear weapons are meant only to deter other nuclear weapons. Others thought this was unlikely to happen. A few asked whether mutual statements by leaders that nuclear war could not be won and must not be fought (as had been said by past Soviet and U.S. leaders) could be helpful.

In areas where existing arms control arrangements lack adequate reach, including space, autonomous weapons, and cyberthreats and vulnerabilities, experts considered whether it might be useful for one or more international groups to create a glossary or glossaries of terms to provide conceptual foundations for dialogue, even if the time is not appropriate for new agreements. Another suggestion was to jointly review the Outer Space Treaty for potential modifications or adjustments.

Keep Talking

Although a year of change and uncertainty had a substantial impact on our views of crisis stability and what could be done, participants in this dialogue emerged more knowledgeable about one another's perspectives, and more realistic about prospects. Both Russian and American experts agreed that at times such as these, when government interactions may be insufficient, expert exchanges can clarify positions and begin to explore options. Moreover, participants from both countries felt confident that there was government support in Moscow and Washington for expert dialogues, even in the context of the tense bilateral environment.

For dialogues to make a difference, however, it is not enough for experts to bridge differences and find areas of common ground. It is crucial to integrate government representatives, so that they can hear and take part in discussions with experts from the other country. Directly inviting representatives from various branches of government to join discussions is one approach. A second approach is for participants and conveners of expert dialogues to brief government officials on conclusions and findings. A third approach is to disseminate discussions, writings, and presentations publicly to increase the level of knowledge about these issues not just among officials, but among the populations of Russia and the United States, overcoming prejudice and faulty assumptions.

Participants agreed it was important to engage officials and public audiences on the dangers of crisis and escalation, and to discuss the risks of ineffective signaling. Many of us hope also to regenerate interest in arms control frameworks, including by exploring new and creative approaches that respond adequately to a changing technological and strategic environment. In the meantime, we intend to keep talking.

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