



Arms Control and Strategic Stability with Russia

The View from Europe

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This policy brief is a product of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) Transatlantic Forum on Russia, an initiative designed to spur coordination between the United States and Europe on Russia-related policy across multiple issue areas. The policy briefs are informed by a series of dialogues with leading experts from both sides of the Atlantic. The analysis and recommendations in the memo reflect areas of agreement between U.S. and European experts. Where there are notable differences in perspective, we highlight those to better enable policymakers to navigate fissures that can hinder coordination. CNAS hosted these arms control and strategic stability-focused dialogues in partnership with Global Zero, and we thank all the experts who contributed to such fruitful dialogue, especially Julia Berghofer, Jeff Edmonds, Anya Fink, Łukasz Kulesa, Bruno Tétrais, and Adam Thomson.

Introduction

The United States and its NATO partners have successfully managed the challenge of deterrence and reassurance for generations. The risk of conflict, even nuclear conflict, with Russia remains all too real, especially as political and military competition continues to escalate, and as new technologies and capabilities come online that could further raise the risk of direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia. Ensuring clear, consistent, and constructive communication among officials and experts within the transatlantic security community about the potential dangers posed by Russian behavior, and how to effectively pursue greater stability together, will be essential if the alliance is to remain successful in the decades to come.

The following assessment is informed by conversations among such experts committed to that goal. The memo identifies European allies and partners' views, interests, and concerns about America's emerging dialogue with Russia on arms control and strategic stability. It is intended to inform U.S. approaches to alliance management and consultation with European allies as well as potential talks and negotiations with the Russian Federation. Although the expert discussions occurred before Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's border resumed in October 2021, the insights the working group produced remain relevant so long as the U.S.-Russia arms control and strategic stability dialogue persists.

State of Play

The United States and Russian Federation have completed two rounds of strategic stability talks and have agreed to a basic plan of work on arms control and related issues. For Washington, the arms control and strategic stability dialogue with Russia will remain an important pillar of that bilateral relationship, so long as Russia refrains from conducting a major military incursion into Ukraine. Should Russia escalate militarily in Ukraine, it could derail, at least temporarily, the U.S.-Russia strategic stability dialogue. In the absence of such an incursion, however, direct, pragmatic engagement can help manage what will be enduring confrontation with the Kremlin. Moreover, the U.S.-Russia relationship will always contain elements of confrontation and engagement, although there are now few opportunities outside of arms control, confidence building, and incident prevention and incident management to engage with Moscow. The Kremlin, too, appears for now to share Washington's view of arms control as a critical mechanism for managing the confrontation between the two countries.

Although questions remain about Russia's urgency to negotiate a follow-on agreement to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) given that the current agreement does not expire until 2026, the process of dialogue itself and opportunity to address challenges that new and emerging technologies pose to strategic stability more broadly can enhance needed guardrails on the relationship. Given that the greatest danger of nuclear use continues to stem from escalation (perhaps unintended) from a smaller clash of conventional forces, such talks are a needed element in managing current dangers in Europe and beyond.

Initial efforts by U.S. officials to consult with NATO allies have yet to produce a unified European or a NATO-wide consensus on the content, focus, and priorities for strategic stability talks with Russia. Indeed, such an outcome may take many months, if it is possible at all. Nonetheless, European allies clearly value the consultations to date, and for now there is broad European support for the U.S.-Russian strategic stability dialogue, for Russia and the United States to pursue a nuclear risk reduction agenda, and for the two countries to reach some form of an agreement on further reductions to replace the New START agreement. If the United States and its European allies move forward with a broader European security dialogue with Russia, allies will want to be included and the imperative for consultation will only increase.

Even before Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's border, European allies and partners were calling for more genuine and sustained consultation with the United States as Washington formulates its positions and pursues its priorities for the strategic stability dialogue with Russia. The current state of transatlantic relations in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the trilateral Australia, United Kingdom, and United States submarine deal has already amplified the European desire for more intensive consultations on strategic stability, nuclear policy, and arms control efforts before engaging with Russia.

European Interests and Concerns about U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability

On many nuclear-related issues, the United States and Europe are aligned. Russia's tactical nuclear weapons, Moscow's increasingly diverse missile arsenal, including hypersonic, extended-range cruise, and dual-capable missiles, and other precision-guided weapons, are real concerns in Europe as in the United States. America and its NATO allies also share concerns about Russian efforts to destabilize the alliance and the Russian "near-abroad" using a variety of tactics, including cyber and other gray zone actions, and the prospect of military and even nuclear escalation. The allies share a concern that a small conflict could quickly escalate, and steps need to be pursued now to prevent unwanted clashes and unexpected escalation between NATO and Russia.

There is no European consensus, however, on the best way to address these dangers, with some states seeking deeper engagement with Russia and others actively seeking an expansion of the deterrence and defense portfolio to prevent Russian provocation. As discussions between the United States and Russia gear up, the European allies have expressed the following views, interests, and concerns about the U.S.-Russia strategic stability dialogue. These issues are summarized with the intent of facilitating alliance management as Washington's stability talks with Russia progress.

Europe has a broad but fragmented view of strategic stability. Europeans see stability as a function of both nuclear and military issues on the one hand, and on political and geo-economic factors on the other. For a significant number of Europeans, strategic stability is not understood in nuclear terms at all: The biggest shocks to strategic stability have been Russia's conventional military interventions in neighboring countries, not Russia's nuclear modernization or adjustments to nuclear doctrine. Many see strategic stability simply as risk reduction and crisis prevention and management. Such an expansive view of strategic stability means that there is support—but less sophisticated analysis—for including cyber- and space-related systems in any negotiation. To that end, European experts are eager to ensure that the United States does not define the entirety of the challenges posed by Russia as nuclear-related, to be dealt with through arms control. Finally, Europeans do not see Russia as the only source of instability: The U.S. withdrawal from several agreements absent obvious Russian violations or obstruction (the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) is also part of Europe's equation.

America needs greater engagement with European partners. Europeans generally understand that the United States has global responsibilities and commitments (and issues on which Washington would interact bilaterally with Moscow) and that these dynamics require a certain freedom of action. Nonetheless, European experts continue to stress the value of states being consulted and having their views considered on issues of central importance to Europe.

The broader the definition of strategic stability that is used in dialogue with Russia, the more persistent the U.S. consultation with allies will need to be. European allies want to be—and should be—consulted on any aspect of U.S.-Russia talks in which their interests are implicated. Many European allies, with France in the lead and Eastern Europeans close behind, are concerned about the possibility of U.S. decisions over their heads that affect their interests, whether on intermediate-range missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, or spheres of influence. Likewise, Europeans are unsure where the United States is headed on territorial missile defense.

For many in Europe, how the United States consults allies will matter to them as much as the content of its positions. They wish to be consulted prior to the adoption of positions and negotiations with Russia. A record of close consultation is especially important where U.S. approaches are not precisely aligned with European views. NATO will be the primary forum for transatlantic consultation, alongside more private engagement in the P3 (United States, France, United Kingdom). Consultation also should take place with the EU, given that its "Strategic Compass" will have a bearing on NATO's next Strategic Concept. The EU-U.S. summit's agreement to establish working groups on strategic stability and on Russia provide an opportunity for such consultation.

European governments worry about changes to NATO nuclear posture. Europeans readily admit that there is a lack of deep and sustained nuclear thinking in Europe, especially in the broader public. Among policy partners, there is broad skepticism that changes to U.S. declaratory policy—including the adopting of "no first use or sole purpose"—will be seen as benefiting European security or deterrence. Moreover, this skepticism is outweighed by the aversion to making any unilateral changes to U.S. forward-deployed nuclear forces in Europe. In the minds of established foreign policy experts, the fear of U.S. abandonment of European security and decoupling the United States from Europe's defense is directly tied to the continued (and perhaps even expanded) role of nuclear sharing. Any steps to change these arrangements carry significant risk of rupturing the alliance and, if pursued, would be complex, requiring significant policy attention and some counterbalancing steps by the United States and NATO to compensate for the perceived reduction in capabilities/commitment.

There is broad European support for new arms control deals that cap all nuclear weapons. There is broad general support for new arms control agreements that cover all U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons—non-strategic as well as strategic. There seems to be no a priori objection to allowing Russian inspections of U.S. bases in Europe as long as decisions are made in full consultation with NATO members and in conformity with standing NATO policy.

Europeans do not agree about the future of deployed nuclear systems in Europe. There is broad support for an agreement that covers all U.S. and Russian nuclear warheads—strategic and non-strategic. But there is no consensus and considerable opposition to the prospect of removing forward-deployed nuclear systems from Europe. Some believe these weapons play an important role in Europe's security, and others do not wish to provoke public discussion of nuclear weapons in Europe. For the opponents, there is no obvious compensation for the removal of U.S. weapons, neither in terms of U.S. deployment of more conventional forces nor some decrease of Russian nuclear forces. At the same time, there is recognition among the expert community that forward-deployed weapons have little if any real military value and would be almost unusable in a conflict.

Europeans want intermediate-range missiles addressed. There is recognition that the intermediate-range missile issue needs to be dealt with in some fashion. European allies have rejected Russia's moratorium proposal that could leave its current systems in place but block any U.S. or NATO steps to match Russia's new systems. At the same time, NATO has made clear that it will not introduce its own nuclear-tipped missiles in response to the 9M-729, and the allies seem to accept that there will have to be a "measured and prudent" NATO response. However, the question of introducing new conventional capabilities in response to the 9M-729 is divisive, and therefore requires close consultation. The same is true for enhanced short-range systems deployed close to Russia's borders.

Moreover, European allies recognize that addressing the intermediate-range missile issue affects the interests of America's Indo-Pacific allies. However, European capitals remain skeptical of the approach adopted by the previous U.S. administration that any progress with Russia on nuclear issues also must include commitments by China. Also, it is difficult to disaggregate America's interest in constraining China's growing nuclear arsenal from the inherent concern that America's pivot to Asia will include some diminished commitment or attention to European security. Therefore, it is doubly important that any effort to address China's nuclear growth also includes key steps that benefit European security—hence the focus on Russian INF-range systems.

Europeans want action on new conventional technologies. The impact of non-nuclear emerging disruptive technologies on deterrence, stability, and nuclear decision-making is gaining ground in European thinking. So far, Germany has led the public debate.

Europeans would oppose bilateral U.S.-Russia agreements in some areas where Europe would be equally affected. There are several areas that Europeans would be uncomfortable to see the United States negotiating (as opposed to discussing) on its own with Moscow. Examples include cyber rules of the road to protect nuclear command and control (in the case of London and Paris) or critical national infrastructure; space; or gray-zone interference in domestic politics.

Europeans remain interested in conventional arms control. Because a significant number of Europeans view strategic stability in terms broader than nuclear, progress with Russia also can be accomplished through conventional arms control measures. NATO needs better internal coordination as well as enhanced lines of communication between NATO and Russia and the United States and Russia to reduce the risks of unintended or inadvertent escalation in a crisis. Although NATO-Russia engagement has grown more difficult since Russia ended its diplomatic engagement, channels still remain, including through Russia's embassy in Brussels, NATO member-state embassies in Moscow, and the still-intact direct line between NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Russia's Chief of the General Staff.

Next Steps

There are several options for U.S. leadership on how best to prioritize strategic stability discussions with Russia, and what topics should be included in bilateral U.S.-Russia negotiations. Assuming that U.S. dialogue with Russia progresses, the following steps would help address allies' concerns:

- Sustain and expand American efforts to engage European governments and civil society on the priorities for U.S.-Russia strategic stability dialogues, and separate nuclear arms control and other traditional areas for negotiation from other intractable issues related to Russian insecurity (such as Russia's near-abroad).
- Consider restoring NATO high-level organization for arms control coordination and dialogue. During the successful 1980s Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty negotiation, NATO established a high-level coordinating committee to facilitate planning, communication, and political decision-making to support negotiations with a direct impact on alliance security and stability.
- Pursue intra-NATO consultations on ways to reduce risk of crisis, and to manage and de-escalate a crisis should one occur, and then develop and share concepts with Russia. Given its apparent goals of destabilization, Russia may not adopt or pursue an offer to address this subject but establishing internal NATO priorities may be helpful for both alliance management and stability with Russia in the future.
- Expand and accelerate U.S.-Europe-Russia strategic stability dialogues—Track 1, 1.5, and 2—however possible. The window for engagement has narrowed to the detriment of information sharing, predictability, and relationship building that may be needed in the future. Many U.S., European, and Russian experts are aging out of the system, and new connections need to be established now.

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