



DECEMBER 2018

Rising Tensions Between the West and Russia: What Role For Arms Control?

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, relations between the West and Russia have hit rock bottom and have spiralled from a political dispute into military tensions. Clearly, this is both undesirable and dangerous. If disputes were limited to the political realm, the risk of escalation would remain modest. However, Moscow's operations go beyond assertive cyber strategies and ham-fisted spying efforts. Today, Russia is engaged in (what Mark Galeotti has called) "heavy metal diplomacy": using military means to impress and intimidate the West.¹ This Policy Brief offers insight into the most pressing concerns, focusing on areas and issues where matters could escalate fastest. It asks what role can still be foreseen for arms control and concludes with a call for transatlantic unity and a stronger role for NATO to counter Russia's military and geopolitical gambit.

2. Geopolitical Posturing – From the Arctic to the Middle East

There are no indications that Russia intends to start military hostilities towards any EU member state, let alone the US. But this is where the "good news" ends. Last September, Russia conducted a large "set of manoeuvres", allegedly involving 300,000 troops (although the estimate by reliable Western sources is lower, around 75,000 troops), including contingents from China and Mongolia.² Russia's *Vostok* ("East") exercise underscored Moscow's growing military ambitions and its willingness to work with China to shape a post-Western world. One region where Russia's military assertiveness is on the rise is the Arctic. Russia has reopened several Soviet-era bases in the Arctic, building new nuclear ice-breakers and vying for regional dominance with traditional rivals such as the US, Canada and Norway, as well as with newcomers like China. According to estimates, the Arctic holds more oil and gas reserves than Saudi Arabia, which explains why Russia is pushing a claim to almost half a million square miles

1 Mark Galeotti, "Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia's Political Use of Its Military in Europe Since 2014", *ECFR Policy Brief* (December 2016).

2 Christopher Woody, "Russia May Be Telling 'True Lies' About Its 'Unprecedented' War Games with China – And It Wouldn't Be the First Time", *Business Insider UK* (13 September 2018). Online.

of Arctic territory.³ As the 2014 annexation of Crimea has proved, Russia is prepared to defend its geostrategic interests with military means. This may explain why the UK decided to deploy 800 Royal Marines in Norway in 2019 (on rotation) as part of plans to establish a new military base there. Moreover, for the first time, four RAF Typhoons will patrol Icelandic skies as of 2019. The US already deployed 330 marines in Norway, in early 2017. Next year, double that number of US marines will move their base closer to the Russian border, although still for “training purposes”.⁴

On 30 September 2018, the UK Government announced a new Defence Arctic Strategy. UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has made it clear that “Russia, with more submarines operating under the ice and ambitions to build over 100 facilities in the Arctic, are staking a claim and militarising the region. We must be ready to deal with all threats as they emerge”.⁵ On 25 October 2018, NATO began a major two-week live field exercise (called Trident Juncture) in Norway, involving military from NATO’s 29 member states, in addition to Finland and Sweden. Until recently, NATO has paid scant attention to the Arctic, but this is likely to change if Russian military posturing in the High North continues.⁶ Worryingly, NATO determined that “Russia was responsible for jamming GPS signals in the Kola Peninsula during Exercise Trident Juncture”, which it considered “dangerous, disruptive and irresponsible”.⁷

Another area of growing tensions between the West and Russia is the Middle East, ranging from Syria to Iran and beyond. Since 2011, Russia’s political support and military cooperation with Syria’s Assad government and Iran’s *Mullah* regime has posed a growing threat to the security of the West, including Israel. Russia’s long-term goal in the Middle East is to undermine US bilateral security alliances “by diminishing the essentiality of US security guarantees for key countries in the region”.⁸ Russia’s goals in Syria are mainly of a (geo)political nature, including fighting regional terrorism. Still, the Russian military has also used its Syria operations to test the modernisation of its forces, offering both “a trial and a showcase for its new [military] capability”.⁹

Russia’s sale (and delivery) of a new system of long-range S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Syria (in October 2018) has been vocally objected to by both the US and Israel. It remains unclear whether these new Russian missiles (presumably operated by Russian military personnel) may be capable of bringing down Israel’s F-16 and F-35 aircraft that have intervened in Syria, mostly to attack Iranian military installations there. One disturbing outcome could be the “United States intervening on Israel’s behalf to help the Israelis cope with the S-300s or to protect the reputation of the F-35 fighter, which has now been ordered (...) by at least nine NATO nations”.¹⁰ Over the coming months, it is likely that Syria will become the theatre where the US Air Force deploys its next-generation F-22s and F16CJ Vipers aimed at destroying and/or suppressing Syria’s air defences, giving it an opportunity to learn how Russia’s high-tech air defence system operates. Russian media now refer to the coming imbroglio in Syria as “a war of words,

3 Andrew Osborn, “Putin’s Russia in Biggest Arctic Military Push Since Soviet Fall”, *Reuters* (30 January 2017). Online.

4 Andrew Foxall, “Russia’s Policies Towards a Changing Arctic: Implications For UK Security”, *The Henry Jackson Society – Russia Studies Centre Research Paper*, no. 12 (June 2017).

5 “Defence Secretary Announces New Defence Arctic Strategy”, *Gov.UK* (30 September 2018). Online.

6 “Norway is Preparing For Massive NATO Exercise”, *Norway Today* (7 September 2018). Online.

7 Ryan Browne, “Russia Jammed GPS During Major NATO Military Exercise With US Troops”, *CNN* (14 November 2018). Online.

8 “Syria and Beyond: Managing Russian Ambitions in the Middle East”, *Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs – Policy Workshop Final Report* (January 2018), p. 9.

9 Mary Dejevsky, “Putin’s Rationale For Syria”, *The World Today* (February/March 2018), p. 45.

10 David J. Bercuson, “Putin May Not Want a Fight With Israel, But He May Get It”, *National Post* (5 October 2018). Online.

threats and terrible intimations”.¹¹ Although hyperbolic, these words do illustrate the volatility of the West’s relations with Russia, and the risk this may escalate into a conflict with military dimensions.

3. Incidents, Risks and Increased Military Power

In this context, it is particularly worrying that since 2014 there has been a documented increase in military “encounters” between Russia and NATO member states and partners across the Euro-Atlantic area.¹² Occasionally, a near-incident may hit the news (e.g. “Russian Fighter Jet Flies Dangerously Close To US Airplane, Navy Says”),¹³ but most events remain underreported. Efforts and initiatives are now underway to raise awareness of the dangers involved, and to set up procedures and mechanisms to avoid and/or manage these military encounters. These initiatives include the development of so-called “principles of due regard” (detailing expected behaviour of state aircraft in close proximity to military aircraft), updating and expanding Agreements on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas (INCSEAs), and Agreements on Preventing Dangerous Military Activities (DMAs). These (usually bilateral) agreements were signed during the Cold War and need to be modernised to reflect today’s military and strategic realities.¹⁴ Ideas are now pursued to work “on a best practices guide or a handbook for preventing and managing dangerous military incidents”, most likely at the OSCE level.¹⁵

This comes at a time when the existing conventional arms control infrastructure – ranging from the CFE Treaty to the Open Skies Treaty and the OSCE’s Vienna Document – is either defunct or blocked.¹⁶ Efforts to strengthen and modernise arms control arrangements (for example through the 2016 Steinmeier initiative) have already lost their momentum. Escalating tensions have now even affected a previously technocratic and low-key organisation like the OPCW. Disagreements over chemical weapons incidents in Syria have resulted in bitterness between Russia and most Western OPCW members. Russia also denies Western interpretations of an OPCW Report that Moscow is responsible for the Salisbury incident involving the British spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter. As a result, Russia is questioning the neutrality of the OPCW, which is particularly worrying since the future of the OPCW remains uncertain now that most chemical weapons have been destroyed worldwide.¹⁷ The fact that four Russian intelligence officials were expelled from the Netherlands (in April 2018) after being caught red-handed spying on the OPCW headquarters has further damaged an already brittle relationship.¹⁸

Nuclear arms control treaties are now also called into question. Over the past decade, both Russia and the US have made ardent allegations that the other party has violated the provisions of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. This has culminated in the announcement (October 2018) by the US Trump administration of its intention to withdraw

11 “S-300s in Syria Will Be Able to ‘See’ America’s 5th-Gen Jets”, *Sputnik News* (8 October 2018). Online.

12 Thomas Frear, “Lessons Learned? Success and Failure in Managing Russia-West Incidents 2014-2018”, *ELN Policy Brief* (April 2018), p. 1.

13 Geoff Ziezulewicz and Tara Copp, “Russian Fighter Jet Flies Dangerously Close To US Airplane, Navy Says”, *NavyTimes* (5 November 2018). Online.

14 Rachael Gosnell, “It’s Time To update INCSEA”, *U.S. Naval Institute Blog* (23 September 2016). Online.

15 Denitsa Raynova and Lukasz Kulesa, “Russia-West Incidents in the Air and at Sea, 2016-2017: Out of the Danger Zone?”, *ELN Report* (October 2018), p. 1.

16 Peter van Ham, “Modernizing Conventional Arms Control in the Euro-Atlantic Region”, *Clingendael Report* (September 2018). For a more optimistic reading of the current state of arms control, see Alexandra Bell and Andrew Futter, “Reports of the Death of Arms Control Have Been Greatly Exaggerated”, *WarOnTheRocks* (4 October 2018). Online.

17 Peter van Ham, Sico van der Meer and Malik Ellahi, “Chemical Weapons Challenges Ahead: the Past and Future of the OPCW”, *Clingendael Report* (October 2017).

18 Judith Mischke, “EU Slams Russia Over Cyber-attacks”, *Politico.EU* (4 October 2018). Online.

from the Treaty.¹⁹ In 2014, the US State Department already claimed that Russia was violating its obligations not to “possess, produce or flight-test” missiles prohibited by the Treaty. In December 2017, the claim was substantiated by pointing (amongst others) at Russia’s SSC-8 (or as Russia labels it: 9M729) cruise missile. Russia has rejected this claim and instead pointed to the US deployment of MK-41 launchers (capable of launching offensive missiles) at the missile defence site in Romania (in February 2010). Russia further claims that some US armed drones are effectively banned cruise missiles.

Although the INF Treaty is a bilateral US-Russia agreement, the probable demise of the Treaty is of key strategic interest to Europe and beyond. With the INF Treaty on the way out, the New (Strategic Arms Reduction) START Treaty (of 2010, which expires in February 2021) will likely collapse. This will directly affect the prospect for conventional arms control. As a worst case scenario, a new (conventional and nuclear) arms race could ensue, with global ramifications.²⁰ Although it was expected that Presidents Trump and Putin would discuss the INF Treaty during the 11 November 2018 Paris Armistice commemoration, no actual progress was made. The final decision on the future of the INF Treaty may well be made during the (scheduled) Putin visit to Washington, in early 2019.

It is against the background of this wide scope of strategic uncertainty that Western military budgets and capabilities are rising. In July 2018, France unveiled plans to increase defence spending by more than one-third (up to 2025). The French nuclear deterrent will receive €37 billion by 2025, with a focus on “future operational superiority”.²¹

19 It should be noted that this political decision by the US Trump administration has not yet been finalised in a formal notice to Russia.

20 Pavel K. Baev, “European Angst About Trump’s INF Treaty Withdrawal”, *Brookings Blog* (29 October 2018). Online.

21 Henry Samuel, “France to Boost Defence Spending in ‘Unprecedented’ Move to Meet NATO Commitments”, *The Telegraph* (8 February 2018). Online.

A UK Commons Defence Committee report (June 2018) called for a rise in the UK defence budget from 2% to 3%, mainly to counter a growing “Russian threat”.²² At the same time, Germany decided to raise its defence budget by 80%, to reach 1.5% of GDP (by 2024).

On the Russian side, a newly approved state armament programme (GPV 2027) aims to revitalise major sections of the Russian defence-industrial complex. Although more limited in scope than its predecessor (GPV 2020), it will prioritise the military modernisation process, particularly Russia’s strategic nuclear triad.²³ Amongst others, the GPV 2027 draws lessons from Russia’s combat experiences in Ukraine and Syria since 2014. Although post-Soviet average defence spending has been around 4% of GDP, Russian defence spending fell by 20% (in real terms) to US\$66.3 billion (in 2018).²⁴ Russia’s economy remains weak (partly due to the West’s sanctions regime), setting strict, practical limits to Moscow’s military capabilities and ambitions.²⁵

The bottom line is that political relations between the West and Russia have entered a new mini-Ice Age, existing arms control arrangements are either dysfunctional or simply not used and both sides are improving their military readiness. The obvious question that needs to be raised is whether, and if so how, these escalating tensions can be contained, or even reduced?

22 UK House of Commons Defence Committee, *Beyond 2 Per Cent: A Preliminary Report on the Modernising Defence Programme*, London (12 June 2018).

23 The nuclear triad includes land-launched nuclear missiles, nuclear-missile-armed submarines, and strategic aircraft with nuclear bombs and missiles.

24 “Russian Military Spending Falls, Could Affect Operations: Think-Tank”, *Reuters* (2 May 2018). Online.

25 Richard Connolly and Mathieu Boulègue, “Russia’s New State Armament Programme: Implications for the Russian Armed Forces and Military Capabilities to 2017”, *Chatham House Research Paper* (May 2018).

4. What Role For Arms Control?

It is clear that political initiatives are required to start a new East-West détente and to avoid the steady escalation of bloc-to-bloc conflict and the hardening of positions. As indicated above, recent new initiatives to prioritise and boost arms control have already run out of steam. A new Structured Dialogue (SD) within the OSCE has been meeting regularly (since April 2017), discussing matters such as threat perceptions, military doctrines and force postures. Although these exchanges are useful, the SD is unlikely to initiate a breakthrough in arms control. Designing new, legally binding treaties (akin to the CFE Treaty) is not on the cards given the unfavourable political conditions.

One key challenge is finding ways to engage Russia in a new round of arms control, including confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). For Russia, the main incentive to join an arms control dialogue will be the ability to negotiate on a par with the US, which may boost its confidence as a Great Power. A future conventional arms control process is bound to be part of a much broader security agenda including all aspects of the INF Treaty, the extension of the New START Treaty, as well as matters such as third-country nuclear forces and US missile defence systems in Europe. The Trump-Putin Helsinki summit (in mid-July 2018) offers insight into the way forward. According to an English translation of a Russian note on the meeting, Putin proposed a five-year extension of the New START Treaty, as well as so-called Strategic Stability consultations in a 2+2 format, involving US and Russian secretaries of State and Defence (as well as meetings between the heads of the US and Russian armed forces).²⁶ The confidentiality of these bilateral Helsinki talks gave rise to suspicions in several European states that a US-Russian agreement could overlook their interests. Although understandable, the model of confidential Great Power summits may still be a good way

to drag the arms control process out of its current rut.²⁷ To keep all NATO members on board in this process, the centrality of NATO should be strengthened (see below).

Under the current US leadership, the West negotiates from a position of strength with Russia, which is likely the only language the Kremlin truly understands. There is no reason to halt the current Western defence build-up and the improvements that are now being made to military readiness. At the same time, this cannot go on forever, and comes with the kind of risks outlined above. Just as the Putin-Obama summits resulted in the New START Treaty on limiting nuclear arms (signed in 2010), new US-Russian talks will be necessary to put arms control high on the agenda, and to strike new deals. New CSBMs between NATO member states and Russia (including the need to update the INCSEAs and DMAs, as mentioned earlier) could be negotiated under this aegis. The fact that the UK-Russia INCSEA was updated in late 2017 is a good sign (and example). A recent ELN Report (October 2018) makes a convincing case for “additional bilateral or sub-regional confidence-building measures”, particularly involving countries that currently lack bilateral agreements of this nature with Russia (e.g. Poland and Romania).²⁸ This will only succeed if more political attention is devoted to these documents and arrangements.

In the meantime, NATO should regain its role as a consultative and decision-making forum on all aspects of arms control and disarmament. NATO’s High-Level Taskforce on Conventional Arms Control (HLTF, created

26 “Putin Offered Trump to Revive Arms Control in Helsinki Talks – Reports”, *Sputnik News* (8 August 2018). Online.

27 A mix of politically binding agreements and so-called “voluntary political declarations” (such as the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, PNIs) may also work. Especially at the end of the Cold War, both US and Soviet leaders “made reciprocal unilateral pledges to substantially limit and reduce their nuclear weaponry, most notably their tactical or ‘battlefield’ nuclear weapons, such as nuclear artillery shells”. See “The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) on Tactical Nuclear Weapons At a Glance”, *Arms Control Today* (July 2017). Online.

28 Raynova and Kulesa, “Russia-West Incidents” (2018), p. 10.

in 1986) has been the preferred platform to coordinate the positions of NATO members during the negotiations for the CFE Treaty. NATO defence planning requires such a coordinated approach by member states towards arms control. The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) offers a useful addition to the arms control ecosystem.²⁹ Today, the NRC meets about three to four times per year at ambassadorial level. Contacts have now also been re-established between NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Russia's Chief of the General Staff. Some Allies prefer to extend NRC meetings to include discussions between other high-ranking officials, and broaden the agenda to include modernising the Euro-Atlantic's arms control regime. In 2016, the NRC already initiated a dialogue on air safety in the Baltic region as part of general NRC consultations on the management of incidents.

Still, at the July 2018 Brussels summit, NATO reiterated that "there can be no return to 'business as usual'" unless Russia meets Western demands (mainly on giving up Crimea).³⁰ This resolute position has become questionable in the light of escalating tensions between the West and Russia. We should also not forget that the arms control agenda is widening towards matters such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), space, as well as cyber. In all three areas, arms control arrangements are necessary but can only be developed between the world's Great Powers, including Russia.³¹

Given these realities, it is clear that the classic two-pronged "Harmel approach", based on deterrence *and* détente, should be restored.³² This includes a mix of US-Russian high summitry (negotiating from a position of military strength) and the revitalisation of NATO's NRC as part of a broad and far-reaching (military) risk reduction process. Pavel Baev recently suggested a "new multilateral NATO-Russia or US-UK-France-Russia format",³³ which may offer both the flexibility and inclusiveness to get arms control back on track. Whatever format may be chosen in the end, the main challenge is to avoid the breakdown of arms control between the West and Russia, since this is likely to spur another arms race and make arms control in new defence spheres (such as AI, space and cyber) more difficult.

29 Kadri Liik and Merle Maigre, "NATO-Russia Dialogue and the Future of the NATO-Russia Council", *ECFR Commentary* (5 July 2016). Online.

30 "Brussels Summit Declaration", *NATO* (11 July 2018). Online.

31 See Gemma Tetlow, "AI Arms Race Risks Spiralling Out Of Control, Report Warns", *Financial Times* (12 January 2017). Online; David A. Koplow, "The Fault Is Not in Our Stars: Avoiding an Arms Race in Outer Space", *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol. 59 (2018); and Paul-Jasper Dittrich and Björn Boening, "More Security in Cyber Space: The Case For Arms Control", *BAKS Security Working Paper*, no. 9 (2017).

32 Tobias Aust, "Modernized Deterrence and Revitalized Dialogue: Adapting the Harmel Report to Post-2014 Europe", *NDC Research Paper*, no. 146 (May 2018).

33 Baev, "European Angst" (2018).




Key Arms Control Treaties and Arrangements – An Overview

Conventional Arms Control Treaties and Arrangements
<p>The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) dates from 19 November 1990 and entered into force in 1992. The Treaty outlines provisions intended to create a secure and stable balance of conventional armed forces between NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation. It places limits on five major conventional weapon systems, i.e. armoured combat vehicles, battle tanks, combat aircraft, pieces of artillery and attack helicopters. The CFE also imposed a series of reporting and notification requirements concerning military exercises and other activities.</p>
<p>The Treaty on Open Skies (OS Treaty) was concluded on 24 March 1992 by the then members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. It came into force in 2002 and involves 34 States Parties. The OS Treaty established a regime of unarmed aerial observation flights over the territories of its signatories. The Treaty is seen as one of the most wide-ranging international arms control efforts to date that promotes openness and transparency in military forces and activities.</p>
<p>The Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs) was originally adopted in 1990 and has been updated most recently in 2011. The document is an agreement between all 57 OSCE participating states and is designed to promote mutual trust and transparency. Its provisions include an annual exchange of military information, mechanisms for risk reduction, on-site inspections and notifications of certain types of military activities.</p>
<p>The OSCE Structured Dialogue was launched by foreign ministers of the Organisation's 57 participating states in December 2016. This was the result of the Steinmeier Initiative, a proposal put forward in August 2016 by the German Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier that provided the basis for initiating a new dialogue on conventional arms control. The Structured Dialogue brings together OSCE Foreign Ministers and other high-level representatives to discuss current and future challenges, and risks to security in the OSCE area.</p>
Nuclear Treaties and Arrangements
<p>The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was signed by the US and the Soviet Union in 1987. The treaty requires destruction of the parties' ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. It also prohibits signatories from possessing, producing and flight-testing both nuclear and conventionally armed missiles within this range.</p>
<p>The New START Treaty was signed by the US and Russia in 2010 and entered into force in 2011. This is a nuclear arms control treaty that requires both parties to meet central limits on strategic arms. It calls for a limitation of deployable nuclear warheads and bombs to 1,550, intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and nuclear bombers to 700, and non-deployed ICBMs, SLBM and bombers to 800.</p>

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

www.clingendael.org
info@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

 [@clingendaelorg](https://twitter.com/clingendaelorg)
 [The Clingendael Institute](https://www.facebook.com/TheClingendaelInstitute)
 [The Clingendael Institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-clingendael-institute)

About the author

Peter van Ham is Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute. Since 2000, he has also been a Visiting Professor at the College of Europe in Bruges (Belgium). His research focuses on European security and defence issues, transatlantic relations, WMD proliferation and arms control.