



Strategic Stability in Europe after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

CNS

DECEMBER 2023

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This paper, and the dinner featuring former NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller, were made possible with the generous support of the German Federal Foreign Office and Denmark's Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

The views, judgments, and conclusions in this report are the sole representations of the authors and do not necessarily represent either the official position or policy or bear the endorsement of CNS or the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.

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Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of strategic stability in Europe nearly two years after the onset of the further Russian invasion of Ukraine. It provides:

- Background on the post-cold war evolution of European security
- A summary of an April 2023 event with former NATO Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller on the future of European strategic stability
- An examination of Russia's planned deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus
- NATO's approach to arms control and strategic stability.

I. The Origin of European Instability: The Soviet Empire and Russian Revanchism

Today's security situation in Europe is poor, with Russia's war on Ukraine set to eclipse in civilian and military death toll, economic cost, and duration the Yugoslav wars as the worst conflict in Europe since World War 2; meanwhile frozen or simmering conflicts continue in the former Soviet Union from Nagorno-Karabakh to Moldova and Georgia.

All these conflicts are part of the degraded security situation caused by Russia along its borders since the end of the Cold War. Low-level conflicts began breaking out across the region as Soviet forces, later Russian, first contested their removal from occupied territories across the Warsaw Pact and former Soviet territory, and then were ordered to withdraw. The removal of Soviet, and later Russian, forces, was slow, and proceeded in fits and starts.

Many countries in Eastern Europe and the states formerly incorporated into the Soviet empire feared that Russian forces would not be removed completely. NATO and the US Government pushed to remove Soviet and Russian forces peacefully. The US Congress threatened sanctions if Moscow did not move quickly;¹ NATO used the recently completed Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, as well as new bodies, such as the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and the High-Level Group² to work to remove Russian forces from Eastern Europe and destroy excess Russian heavy armour and other military equipment in a transparent manner. The START nuclear arms control treaty also entered into force along with denuclearization agreements with Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Ukraine.

The removal of Russian forces from the former Soviet Union went far slower than most are aware, with the last Russian forces leaving the Baltic states in October 1999.³ Russia has refused to remove its occupation troops from Moldova and Georgia, after promising to complete its withdrawal from the former in 2002 and the latter in 2006. Russia also has continually interfered in Ukraine, setting the stage for the re-emergence of conflict that we see today. Throughout the 1990s, Russia complained about the possibilities of NATO enlargement, hoping to retain the ability to restore control or at least

¹ *The Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995*, HR 2333, 103rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1994.

² Richard Falkenrath, *Shaping Europe's Military Order: The Origins and Consequences of the CFE Treaty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995).

³ "Russia Pulls Last Troops Out of Baltics," *The Moscow Times*, October 22, 1999, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/archive/russia-pulls-last-troops-out-of-baltics>.

to intimidate the states along its border. Russia also conducted a series of exercises, beginning with ZAPAD 1999, to demonstrate its willingness to use nuclear weapons in a war with NATO to prevent the West from preventing a so-called “colour revolution” and replacing the regime in Moscow.

This period, defined by the Western perception of triumph and conciliation with Russia, may also be interpreted as an interregnum within which Russia sought to establish and maintain a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe while it sought to rebuild its military capabilities to re-establish itself as a great power. This period ended with President Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Munich security conference on 10 February 2007. In that speech, Putin announced Russia’s discontent with the post- Cold War order and signalled his renewed confidence in his ability to pursue a new conflict paradigm with the West. Putin, having learned the lesson from the Cold War, also sought to limit the reach of the OSCE, free press, and open elections in Russia, solidifying his internal control over the Russian public square, eliminating Western and Western-sympathetic voices within Russia, and solidifying his control over Russia’s governance.

Russia’s confidence in its international affairs was built primarily on Putin’s internal control of the country, coupled with the replenishment of its military capabilities funded by the persistent spike in oil prices after the second Iraq War, and secondarily on US and European distraction and degradation of capabilities brought about by its misperception of the security environment and its focus on the Global War on Terror. Russia departed the CFE Treaty (suspending implementation in 2007, with withdrawal complete on 7 November 2023), claiming discontent about the 22 NATO Allies lack of ratification of the Adapted version of that Treaty – but this claimed desire for ACFE was instead an effort by Russia to force the West to pressure Georgian and Moldova to de jure accept permanent Russian occupation. When the effort to coerce the West into ACFE failed, Russia then invaded Georgia, illegally declaring two parts of Georgia as independent countries and permanently stationing forces on these separatist entities. Russia also has suspended its implementation of the Vienna Document and may seek to withdraw soon. NATO retaliated against Russia’s withdrawal from CFE by suspending operation of the Treaty indefinitely (later on the same day as Russia’s withdrawal).

THE FOREVER WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

Russia’s war on Ukraine has its origins with Kiev’s declaration of independence and the destruction or removal of all the former Soviet nuclear weapons to Russian territory. Russia immediately sought to guarantee its control over Crimea, using threats and intimidation to ensure it was granted long-term leases to access its military and port facilities there. Whenever the government in Kyiv publicly discussed the future of Crimea, Russia would begin a pressure campaign either to force a renunciation of such claims, or to change the

government itself. Russia also fears Ukrainian democratic reforms, particularly in the judiciary and the fight against corruption. Any such changes in Ukraine are seen in Moscow as a direct challenge both to its own access to the benefits of Ukrainian corruption, as well as to the corrupt structures and practices in Russia itself.



Bucha main street after Russian invasion of Ukraine. Source: Oleksandr Ratushniak via Wikimedia Commons

Russian fears of efforts to integrate Ukraine into Western structures and to structurally eliminate corruption came to a head with the conclusion of the European Union's Association Agreement. The conclusion of this agreement combined with the abdication of the Russian-leaning government in Kyiv, as well as fears over the new government's attitude towards Russian forces in Crimea, became the direct cause of Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea. A subsequent uneasy stalemate, with Russian forces occupying a portion of Ukraine's east, ended on 24 February 2022. The proximate cause of Russia's renewed attack on Ukraine was a combination of Ukraine's effort to change its Constitutional Court to better prosecute corrupt oligarchs, as well as the effort to prosecute one particular oligarch connected to Putin. These efforts would create the conditions to eliminate corruption and threaten Putin's ability to provide his inner circle with the ability to profit from Ukrainian corruption.

THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP: CONTINUITY IN THE US-RUSSIA DIVIDE

The relationship between the US and Russia has gone through peaks and troughs, related to much of Russia's actions related to the forgoing, as well as its desire to be seen by the US as an equal. Currently, the relationship is as poor as the worst days of the Cold War, closer to President Dwight Eisenhower's relationship with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Bilateral arms control is likely to end soon, with no agreement likely to replace the New START Treaty – expiring in February 2026 – marking the first time there is no viable arms control talks between the US and Russia since the 1960s. Cyclical US efforts to “reset” its relations with Russia have failed, as their national interests remain fundamentally misaligned. Until and unless Russia gains an interest in becoming a status quo power, rather than a revisionist power (or the US changes its fundamental foreign policy orientation under a Trump-like president), this misalignment will persist indefinitely.

Arms control in general is not in fashion in Moscow, mirroring the US position during the George. W Bush Administration – which also sought to remove constraints on its freedom of action as expressed in the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (2002) and the draft START II agreement. Part of Putin's modernisation of his military forces includes dual-capable short and medium-range missiles, based on all available platforms, resulting in Russia's violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty. Russia's decision to withdraw likely was made during the Bush Administration, with Russian overtures for mutual withdrawal starting in 2007, and work on the INF-violating 9M729 beginning around this time.

Attempted U.S. renewals of the relationship with Russia, initiated by Obama, Trump, and Biden all failed, with each seeking Strategic Stability (or Security) talks – and all failing. The latest efforts were suspended with Russia's invasion of Ukraine but talks within the P5 on nuclear issues – including strategic stability – have continued despite the war. US-Russian communication continues, but remains fraught, with many inside the US and among allies concerned about the possibility of some condominium between the US and Russia over the heads of Ukraine and allied interests. Similar concerns date back decades, to the beginning of US-Soviet talks in the 1960s and will continue as long as the US continues to remain opaque in its talks.

II. Gottemoeller on NATO and the Future of Arms Control and Strategic Stability

On 19 April 2023, the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) hosted a dinner dialogue on “NATO and the Future of Arms Control and Strategic Stability in Europe” at the Hoover Institution Headquarters in Washington, DC. The event included a welcome speech by Christina Markus Lassen, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Denmark to the United States, with the keynote delivered by former NATO Deputy Secretary General the Hon. Rose Gottemoeller. Ms. Gottemoeller, the Steven C. Hazy Lecturer at Stanford University, then lead a discussion among participants on how NATO should approach arms control, deterrence, and strategic stability in the wake of Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s suspension of participation in the New START Treaty. The event took place at the conclusion of the 18th Annual NATO Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament and Weapons of Mass Destruction Non-Proliferation, hosted by the United States for the first time.

Miles Pomper, Senior Fellow at CNS introduced the speaker and kicked off the evening with welcoming remarks. Then, Amb. Lassen delivered the keynote, describing the current moment as an inflection point with Russia’s war on Ukraine creating a new security reality in Europe, shattering peace and order. She noted that NATO had risen to the occasion – supporting Ukraine and adding Finland and Sweden as members of the Alliance. She declared that there was an urgent need for a focus on NATO as a security provider and the future of strategic stability dialogue in Europe.

Lassen recalled that the 17th NATO WMD Conference was hosted in Copenhagen, and was a welcome opportunity to resume face-to-face meetings after the 16th had to be held online – “like letting the cows out onto grass again.”⁴ However, since then, Russia’s illegal war has dealt a heavy blow to arms control, which already was under considerable pressure by Russia – even worse than during the previous meeting in Copenhagen – including dangerous nuclear rhetoric, as part of Russia’s dangerous and irresponsible behaviour, the threat of deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus, and the suspension of New START and resulting potential end of bilateral arms control for the first time in 50 years. Lassen was careful to add that there have been no observed

⁴ Øko-dag is a popular event in Denmark where crowds gather to watch cows that have been kept inside for the winter as they are let out onto the grass: Anders Haldrup, “Danish attraction – ‘Dancing Cows’ (Øko-dag),” YouTube, 05/24/2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_h57LvGYz78.

changes to Russia's nuclear posture that would force NATO to change its deterrent posture, but that Allies are watching carefully.

Lassen concluded that we are living in a complicated security environment, which poses serious challenges in the most trying of circumstances. NATO is strengthening its defence and deterrence, but arms control must remain a part of our security equation, including strict control of nuclear arms, with limitations and strict verification. At this critical inflection point, if bilateral arms control is to survive, it must evolve to include control over all warheads, including non-strategic nuclear weapons, and must include China.

Ms. Gottemoeller followed with the keynote speech, further discussing the fraught security environment, condemning Russia's bloody, egregious, and illegal invasion as well as its own internal spiral of political violence. Russia has arrested, beaten, and poisoned (it is suspected) its political opposition (Alexei Navalny), regime critics (Vladimir Kara-Murza) and even US journalists (Evan Gershkovich). The espionage charges against American journalists recalled the darkest days of the Soviet era and herald a new low in US-Russia relations. While Russia is deep in the grip of repression, violence, and fear, it has returned nuclear weapons to the centre of international security debates. She quoted Sergei Lebedev in the *Financial Times* talking about Russia's slide: "We were asleep at the wheel when our president turned from a rational, practical autocrat into a maniac with a nuclear bomb."⁵

Gottemoeller recalled that Russia's suspension of New START is **especially** puzzling, as it will diminish their transparency precisely as the US embarks on the comprehensive modernisation of its arsenal in a vain effort to pry Washington away from supporting Ukraine. It will not work. She highlighted the dual burden carried by the US and USSR as nuclear superpowers, acknowledged by both sides, especially in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Since that dangerous moment, the sides cooperated to draft and negotiate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and engage in risk reduction and strategic arms control to reduce the risk of nuclear war.

Now, Gottemoeller said, Russia is a pariah state with nuclear weapons, leaving the burden of responsibility to the United States. Fortunately, the US has its friends and partners for help in lowering the nuclear temperature in the face of Russian sabre rattling and its impending deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus. The US must retain and strengthen its lines of communication with Russia for two reasons: 1) to develop pathways towards stability and 2) to convey tough deterrence messages – dialogue should not be a reward, but rather must be direct and tough. But how to strengthen communication?

⁵ Guy Chazan, "Writer Sergei Lebedev: 'If Russia Is to Have Any Future, It Will Have to Become Another Country,'" *Financial Times*, April 9, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/4b2e6285-fdd9-43a1-bd9e-014970470ded>.



Former NATO Deputy Secretary General the Hon. Rose Gottemoeller.

Russia says New START is dead, but Russia's Track 2 has floated some ideas on the importance of remaining tools for risk reduction. Gottemoeller highlighted an April 8 article by Elena Chernenko in *Kommersant*⁶ which lists five tools:

- Agreement on measures to reduce the risk of the outbreak of nuclear war between the USSR and the USA of September 30, 1971;
- Agreement between the USSR and the USA on the prevention of nuclear war of June 22, 1973;
- Agreement between the USSR and the USA on the establishment of nuclear risk reduction centres of September 15, 1987;
- Agreement between the USSR and the USA on notifications of launches of intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles of May 31, 1988; and
- Agreement between the USSR and the USA on reciprocal advance notification of major strategic exercises of September 23, 1989.

However, Gottemoeller said that these tools do not compensate for the end of New START. China and India have reacted strongly to Russia's nuclear threats, illustrating the isolated stance it has taken. She asked if Russia has a specific proposal on how to consult based on these five agreements?

⁶ Elena Chernenko, "Éto vse, chto ostanetsia posle nego," *Kommersant*, April 8, 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5925040>.

On Belarus (see below), she said, Russia's moves to station nuclear weapons in Belarus contradict the December 5, 1994, Trilateral Statement on Security Assurances in connection with the Republic of Belarus' accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, where Belarus committed to eliminate all nuclear weapons from its territory.⁷ The introduction of new nuclear weapons storage in Belarus and training of its pilots by Russia runs against the spirit and the letter of the agreement. President Vladimir Putin's effort to equate his actions with US and NATO nuclear sharing are false. The NATO nuclear sharing arrangements were front and centre in the US-Soviet negotiations of the treaty to prevent West Germany from getting the bomb. However, Russia's move constitutes a change to Belarus' status, as well as its constitution.

These recent developments, according to Gottemoeller, are a good opportunity to examine the proposal by Sam Nunn and Ernest Moniz in *Foreign Affairs* for dialogue on fail-safe mechanisms for nuclear warheads between the US and Russia, and even among the P5 bilaterally or multilaterally. She noted that the newly modernized US B-61-12s have enhanced safety protections and permissive action links to prevent accidents, with enhanced controls on arming.⁸ She wondered whether Russia has similar controls, but it would be good to have dialogue on this topic among the P5 and even beyond – to India and Pakistan – as well.

Gottemoeller then shifted to conventional arms control in Europe. She said it was approaching a shambles even before Russia's war on Ukraine. She recalled that Russia's "suspension" of New START is using the same playbook as its actions against the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty in 2007. Russia's actions also have weakened the Open Skies Treaty and the Vienna Document, which both provide security and need to be protected and rebuilt even without Russian participation. Countries that remain within them should fully implement them and rebuild on this foundation after victory in Ukraine. We need to consider what is stabilizing or destabilizing, including the massing of forces on borders, conduct of snap exercises, and unlimited use of missiles and drones in warfare. We cannot rebuild these agreements as they were, but need new approaches, technologies, commercial engagement, and supportive approaches. Gottemoeller recalled an article she wrote with Diana Marvin⁹ – a renowned expert on the Open Skies Treaty – on how to use Open Skies

⁷ "Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with the Republic of Belarus' Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," Wikisource, accessed November 30, 2023, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Memorandum_on_Security_Assurances_in_connection_with_the_Republic_of_Belarus%27_accession_to_the_Treaty_on_the_Non-Proliferation_of_Nuclear_Weapons.

⁸ Earnest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn, "Confronting the New Nuclear Peril," *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-confronting-new-nuclear-peril>.

⁹ Rose Gottemoeller and Diana Marvin, "Reimagining the Open Skies Treaty: Cooperative Aerial Monitoring," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 15, 2021, <https://thebulletin.org/2021/06/reimagining-the-open-skies-treaty-cooperative-aerial-monitoring/>.

for wider monitoring tasks as a confidence building measure, including using commercial satellites, and aircraft. The article advocates for improving the scope as well, to include climate monitoring and environmental sampling.

Gottemoeller concluded her remarks highlighting the importance of conventional arms control in Europe and the need for NATO to best understand how to maximize the benefits of the regime, including mutual confidence and predictability. While we cannot envisage such talks today, it will require Russian participation, especially after Ukraine is victorious. We must be able to ensure that Russia will not be able to rebuild, regroup, and strike again. NATO will need to engage with Russia, no matter how distasteful, based on the principles of NATO's Harmel Report of 1967,¹⁰ where the alliance engages in principled dialogue on the basis of deterrence and defence. While not possible today, NATO will need to engage again, just as it did in the Cold War.

With that, the session turned to Questions and Answers.

1. How does Open Skies include commercial firms?

Gottemoeller answered that commercial imagery already far outstrips the maximum resolution allowed under the Treaty, so the sides should be ready.

2. What would a future agreement past New START look like?

Gottemoeller said the US should prioritize keeping New START in place and retaining the legal relationship. While Russia is not in compliance, we do not believe it is exceeding the limits, and it surely will wake up in the context of US modernization. As they burn through their conventional forces in Ukraine, will they instead rely on nuclear weapons? On the substance of a new treaty, the US wants limits on all Russian warheads and exotic systems, so we need to get back to the table. We do not know if their requirements are the same – prompt global **strike**, precision conventional weapons, missile defences – and if the Russians insist on trying to limit U.S. missile defences, we need to insist that Russia's new advances in missile defence, such as the S-500s, are on the table too.

3. With so many issues facing the US in this space, where do we start and how do we prioritize?

Gottemoeller replied that first, we need restraints on Russia. Second, we need to engage China, third we need to decide on the shape of Euro-Atlantic conventional arms control with Russia, and fourth, we need to understand better how to use advanced technology to monitor and verify arms control.

4. How do we engage with China and separate them from Russia?

Gottemoeller replied that there is some hope, as President Xi Jinping has issued warnings to Putin over his rhetoric, alongside Indian President Narendra Modi in Kazakhstan. The two are not entirely aligned, and China increasingly sees Russia as the little brother in the relationship. We

¹⁰ "Harmel Report," NATO, July 1, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67927.htm.

must define our mutual interests with China, and where we have similar capabilities. The US is preparing to deploy new missiles in Asia, which may increase Chinese interests in talks.

5. How do we engage with Russia after a Ukrainian victory?

Gottemoeller replied that she bifurcates the issues of nuclear weapons from the European security architecture – if it is possible to get back to the nuclear negotiating table even before Ukraine’s victory, we should do so. And certainly, we need to take Ukraine’s security interests into account in any talks on the European security architecture.

6. Are military capabilities Russia’s issues, or is our conflict political?

Gottemoeller replied that Russia’s concerns are political, built on the foundation of Putin’s paranoia and desire to recreate the Russian Empire. She used as an example Finland and Sweden’s applications to join NATO, which should be of vital concern to Russia, but instead were largely ignored by Putin, further proving the false narrative Russia has pushed that NATO is a threat.

7. How and when do we think about Conventional Arms Control (CAC), and is it even viable with Russia?

Gottemoeller replied that while we do not immediately need to prioritize future CAC, governments, academia and think tanks can play a vital role in thinking about the future. Putin wants to destroy the entire Helsinki Final Act acquis, and the Russians will have to change course fundamentally if we are to embark on talks. In the meantime, we should ask, what do we need, what do we want, and do the hard work amongst ourselves. Ultimately, if Russia does not show contrition and seek to repair the damage they have done after the Ukrainian victory, then nothing is possible.

8. How do we make sense of Russia’s actions?

Gottemoeller replied that it is indeed confusing. Putin in 2014 called New START the “gold standard” of arms control treaties when other voices in Russia challenged the treaty. However, Putin’s inner circle has cut out the arms control experts and advocates, focusing instead on a bubble of yes-men divorced from reality. Russia’s interagency is divided, and arms control is not likely to be in the ascendancy in Moscow for some time.

9. How can Central Europe respond to the imminent threat of Russian NSNW beyond CBMs or arms control?

She replied that NATO has reacted strongly to Russia’s NSNW, including the 9M729. NATO is improving its integrated air and missile defence, its resilience and redundancy, its exercises and training, and is examining the potential of a return of conventionally armed ground-launched missiles to Europe. While we hope for positive developments, we need a NATO military response to Russia’s actions. Confidence building measures on NSNW are not the answer, but rather strict arms control over all of Russia’s nuclear weapons, whether deployed in Russia or Belarus.

III. Russia's Planned Deployment of Nuclear Weapons to Belarus

Russia has been seeking to integrate Belarus since at least 1999, when it initiated the Union State Treaty.¹¹ It has sought permission to station aircraft and air defence systems on Belarusian territory multiple times since then but Belarusian Lukashenko had resisted permanent stationing, instead allowing rotational deployments and ever-larger exercises, including the quadrennial ZAPAD (West) and Shchit Soyuz (Union Shield) exercises. In April 2021, Lukashenko relented to establishing joint air patrols and pilot training but continued to resist permanent stationing of Russian forces.

However, Belarus lost this battle in November 2021, with EU sanctions crippling Belarus' economy and narrowing the space for future manoeuvre, a failure illustrated by Lukashenko's agreement to a significant change in Belarus' constitution.¹² Lukashenko initiated the process of changing the constitution after a face-to-face meeting with Putin in Moscow on Sept. 9, 2021,¹³ to discuss how to advance "the integration processes within the Union State." This meeting resulted in agreement on a new joint military doctrine on November 4¹⁴, allowing Russia to place 9,000 troops in Belarus as part of an "Operational Group of Forces." More importantly, Lukashenko submitted changes to the Belarusian Constitution to the Constitutional Commission¹⁵ on November 15, removing language stating that Belarus would remain a nuclear-weapon free state. Subsequently, on November 30, 2021, Lukashenko said on Russia Today that "I will offer Putin [the opportunity] to return nuclear weapons to Belarus."

¹¹ "News," Union State, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://xn--c1anggbpdf.xn--p1ai/en/news/>.

¹² William Alberque, "Belarus Seeks to Amend Its Constitution to Host Russian Nuclear Weapons," IISS, February 4, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis//2022/02/belarus-seeks-to-amend-its-constitution-to-host-russian-nuclear-weapons>.

¹³ "On September 9, Vladimir Putin Will Hold Talks with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko," President of Russia, September 9, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66634>.

¹⁴ "Meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State," President of Russia, November 4, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67066>.

¹⁵ "Sovmestnoe zasedanie Konstitutsionnoï komissii i rabocheï gruppy po dorabotke proekta Konstitutsii," President of the Republic of Belarus, November 25, 2021, <https://president.gov.by/ru/media/details/sovmetnoe-zasedanie-konstitucionnoy-komissii-i-rabochey-gruppy-po-dorabotke-proekta-konstitucii>.

On June 25, 2022, Lukashenko asked Putin for an increased deterrence presence in Belarus¹⁶ in response to NATO. Putin promised to deliver Iskander missiles—making a point that they would be nuclear capable—as well as retrofitting Belarusian Su-25s to deliver nuclear weapons. On August 26, Lukashenko announced that Belarusian aircraft had been upgraded,¹⁷ and on December 19, Lukashenko thanked Putin and said¹⁸ that he had “put on combat duty...the Iskander complex, which you also, having promised it six months ago, handed over to us.” On December 25, Belarus repeated the claim¹⁹ that the aircraft had been upgraded to carry “special aviation ammunition” (the Russian term for air-dropped nuclear bombs). On February 1, 2023, Col. Ruslan Chekov, head of the Belarusian Missile Troops and Artillery Forces, announced²⁰ that Belarus had established “autonomous control” of their Iskanders,²¹ indicating that they can operate them without Russian support.

On March 26, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin went on Russian television²² to say that he is preparing to deploy nuclear warheads²³ on Belarusian territory. Putin claimed that the planned move was a response to the UK deploying Challenger II tanks in Ukraine with depleted uranium rounds (a claim that is quite unusual considering Russia’s extensive experience²⁴ with depleted uranium tank rounds). Putin said relevant nuclear weapons site preparations in Belarus would be completed by July 1, leaving open the question of whether this work has already begun. He said that Russia would not transfer control of the warheads to Belarus, although they are intended for the Iskander-M ground-launched ballistic missiles (NATO name: RS-SS-26

¹⁶ 16 “Vstrecha s Prezidentom Belorussii Aleksandrom Lukashenko,” President of Russia, June 25, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68702>.

¹⁷ RFE/RL’s Belarus Service, “Lukashenka Says Belarusian Military Planes Ready To Carry Russian Nuclear Armament,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 26, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenka-belarus-military-russian-nuclear-planes/32005797.html>.

¹⁸ Jaroslaw Adamowski, “Belarus Says Its Russian S-400, Iskander Missiles Enter ‘Combat Duty,’” *Defense News*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/12/20/belarus-says-its-russian-s-400-iskander-missiles-enter-combat-duty/>.

¹⁹ *Reuters*, “Belarus Says Russia-Deployed Iskander Missile Systems Ready for Use,” *Voice of America*, December 25, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/belarus-says-russia-deployed-iskander-missile-systems-ready-for-use/6891489.html>.

²⁰ “Polkovnik Ruslan Chekhov ob Iskander,” Minsk Suvorov Military Academy, February 1, 2023, <https://mnsvu.org/news/armiya/polkovnik-ruslan-chehov-iskander/>.

²¹ “Dobro pozhalovat v stroi, «Iskander» (video),” Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, February 1, 2023, <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/157449/>.

²² “Moskva. Kreml. Putin,” *Smotrim.ru*, accessed December 1, 2023, <https://smotrim.ru/brand/63170>.

²³ *Guardian News*, “Vladimir Putin Says Russia Will Station Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Belarus,” YouTube, March 26, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdG9TQFZ2Nw>.

²⁴ Ellie Cook, “How Russia Has Used Depleted Uranium Shells,” *Newsweek*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-depleted-uranium-munitions-uk-military-aid-tank-armor-1790756>.

Stone)—an unknown number of which have already been transferred to Belarus—and for 10 Belarusian aircraft that he said Russia has upgraded to be able to deliver nuclear weapons. “We have already helped our Belarusian colleagues to equip their aircraft, aircraft of the Belarusian Air Force. Ten aircraft are ready to use this type of weapon,” he said.

Putin further declared that training for the Belarusian pilots will begin on April 3, and indicated that Russia will train Belarusian troops to prepare the systems and deliver the warheads, “without violating our obligations, I emphasize, without violating our international obligations on the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons.” The next day, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova²⁵ seemed to imply that this deployment is part of the broader Russian-Belarusian “Union State” project, raising doubts about the independence of the Belarusian state.

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE APRIL 2023

Since the above event in April 2023, Russia’s plans to deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus have progressed, but with ambiguous results. On 4 April, Belarusian MOD²⁶ reported that their troops were trained by Russia to use and handle nuclear warheads for the Iskander-M missile. On 14 April 2023, a Belarusian pilot described²⁷ his training to air-deliver nuclear bombs at Lida Air Base, reinforcing the message that Belarusian Su-25s had been upgraded, and that Lida Air Base would be one of the homes for Russian nuclear weapons. By May, work was underway at a pre-existing weapons depot (former nuclear artillery, until recently, conventional-only) near Asipovichy – the home of the 465th Missile Brigade and Belarus’ Iskanders – that appears closer to Russian nuclear weapons storage standards.

In June 2023, Putin pushed the date²⁸ of nuclear deployment to Belarus from 1 July to 7-8 July, closer to the Vilnius NATO Summit. However, Lukashenko doubled-down on the nuclear deployments on 13 June before the media, giving more background and detail²⁹ to the nuclear decision. He said that Belarus will use 5-6 facilities for nuclear storage, and that he had originally

²⁵ “Kommentarii ofitsial'nogo predstavitelia MID Rossii M.V.Zakharovoï v sviazi s vyrazheniem riadom stran Zapada ozabochennosti otnositel'no rossiïsko-belorusskogo vzaimodeïstviia v iadernoï sfere,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 27, 2023, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1859880/.

²⁶ Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, “Soobshchenie press-sluzhby,” *Telegram*, April 4, 2023, <https://t.me/modmilby/25140?single>.

²⁷ VoenTV Belarusi, “Podgotovka letnogo i inzhenerno-tekhnicheskogo sostava,” YouTube, April 14, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jXJ1ZxPdPg>.

²⁸ “Russian Tactical Weapons to Begin to Be Placed in Belarus after July 7-8 – Putin,” *TASS*, June 9, 2023, <https://tass.com/defense/1630157>.

²⁹ “Lukashenko on Circumstances for Possible Nuclear Response from Belarus,” *BelTA*, June 13, 2023, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-on-circumstances-for-possible-nuclear-response-from-belarus-159581-2023/>.

wanted nuclear-armed multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), but that Russia could not oblige. He also said he wanted strategic missiles,³⁰ which could rely on old Soviet SS-25 launch points that had not been dismantled in the 1990s under the Nunn-Lugar program. Lukashenko cut off cooperation under Nunn-Lugar as soon as he took office, leaving some of the nuclear weapons infrastructure intact throughout Belarus, if in variable levels of upkeep. On 16 June, Putin told at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum³¹ that the “first nuclear weapons have been delivered, but only the first part,” and that more would be shipped by the end of the year. There is some circumstantial evidence³² that a movement in June may have taken place, with another scheduled for November, as well as noting a trans-shipment point for warheads in the northeast of the country. However, there is no visual evidence to confirm that warhead shipments³³ have taken place.

Finally, in the NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, published on 11 July 2023, and discussed more in the following section, Allies condemned the latest developments (paragraph 16):

We condemn Russia’s announced intention to deploy nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable systems on Belarusian territory, which further demonstrates how Russia’s repeated actions undermine strategic stability and overall security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Which brings us to the Summit Communiqué.

³⁰ “Lukashenko on Circumstances for Possible Nuclear Response from Belarus,” *BelTA*, June 13, 2023, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-on-circumstances-for-possible-nuclear-response-from-belarus-159581-2023/>.

³¹ “What Did Putin Say at Russia’s Flagship Economic Forum?,” *Al Jazeera*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/16/st-petersburg-forum-what-did-russian-president-putin-say>.

³² “Poriadok vvoza rossiiskogo iadernogo oruzhiia v Belarus,” Community of Railway Workers of Belarus, June 27, 2023, <https://belzhd.info/military-transportation/poryadok-vvoza-rossijskogo-yadernogo-oruzhiya-v-belarus/>.

³³ Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Russian Nuclear Weapons Deployment Plans In Belarus: Is There Visual Confirmation?” *Federation of American Scientists*, June 30, 2023, <https://fas.org/publication/russian-nuclear-weapons-deployment-plans-in-belarus-is-there-visual-confirmation/>.

IV. NATO's Approach to Arms Control and Strategic Stability

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and the Vilnius 2023 Summit Communiqué are clear illustrations of the new NATO approach to arms control and strategic stability. The new Strategic Concept provides the starkest changes – coming as it has 13 years after the previous Concept.

THE NATO 2022 STRATEGIC CONCEPT

First, the Concept uses the strongest language about Russia since the 1991 Strategic Concept, which said that the Soviet military and policies could change for the worse and threaten allied interests. The 2022 Strategic Concept states that “the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.” Also notable is the new NATO China policy – the first official, agreed public document that discusses NATO China policy since 1965. The Concept says that China’s “stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values.”



NATO Summit 2023, Source: Number 10 via Flickr

The Concept also discusses risk reduction and transparency as a form of arms control with both Russia and China. On Russia, while “NATO does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to the Russian Federation”, NATO will “remain willing to keep open channels of communication with Moscow to manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation, and increase transparency. We seek stability and predictability in the Euro-Atlantic area and between NATO and the Russian Federation.” For China, NATO will “remain open to constructive engagement with the PRC, including to build reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance’s security interests.”

On arms control, the 2022 Strategic Concept describes the problems facing the current instruments and global regime, but is pessimistic about the situation, due to Russian violations and selected implementation. It also describes the increased threat of the use of WMD against NATO, as well as direct WMD threats posed by Iran, North Korea, Syria, Russia, and non-state actors. It acknowledges Russian and Chinese arms racing, and China’s lack of interest “in increasing transparency or engaging in good faith in arms control or risk reduction.”

Instead, the Concept looks to strategic stability, falling back on the Harmel Report definition of how arms control works: deterrence and defence first, and then on that basis, arms control. The concept of strategic stability in the Concept could apply to Russia or China: “strategic stability, delivered through effective deterrence and defence, arms control and disarmament, and meaningful and reciprocal political dialogue remains essential to our security.” On arms control, while allies still find it useful as a tool, and will continue to consult at NATO Headquarters, NATO instead will seek to use crisis management and crisis prevention to manage its security interests. The Concept still sees value in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but for outer space and cyber space, seeks rules and norms to govern behaviour.

THE 2023 VILNIUS SUMMIT COMMUNIQUÉ

The most recent communiqué has weighed in on strategic stability, stating that arms control makes an essential contribution to it. This is the first mention of strategic stability since the 2012 Chicago Summit, where it was mentioned only in relation to missile defence. The communiqué has extensive language on deterrence and nuclear deterrence, with incrementally strengthened language, continuing the trend that began at the 2014 Wales Summit, but remaining with the focus on integrating the full spectrum of deterrence capabilities, the ability to impose costs, the role of the US, UK, and France, and the need to modernise and improve planning and exercising.

The communiqué falls short of committing to fully integrate conventional and nuclear forces in planning and exercises, and does not mention integrated deterrence as a concept, but it does reflect an increased confidence in NATO’s

ability to communicate the need for nuclear weapons and their increasing role in NATO's defence. This new confidence is most obvious in a new phrase, not seen in previous communiqués: "NATO is ready and able to deter aggression and manage escalation risks in a crisis that has a nuclear dimension."

On arms control, the communiqué reverts to earlier language, abandoning the new formulation in the Strategic Concept that mentions crisis management or crisis prevention:

Arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation have made and should continue to make an essential contribution to achieving the Alliance's security objectives and for ensuring strategic stability and our collective security...Allies remain collectively determined to uphold and support existing disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation agreements and commitments. We will further strengthen arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation, as a key element of Euro-Atlantic security, taking into account the prevailing security environment and the security of all Allies.

The communiqué discusses the threat posed by Russia more extensively and more comprehensively than before, in line with the strengthened language that started in 2012 at Chicago. It also discusses the threat posed by China, especially with its buildup and refusal to engage in transparency or arms control but going farther than previous years in condemning China's effort to produce weapons-useable nuclear material in ostensibly commercial reactors to aid its nuclear buildup, while also condemning Iran and North Korea.

Conclusion

Strategic stability in Europe has been destabilized by a Russia that is actively seeking to use the risk of conflict to inhibit the behavior of Western states, along with the use of force and threats of use of force against its neighbours. NATO's response to Russia's actions, and its new policy on arms control – focusing on practical matters of conflict management and risk reduction – should be understood in this context. While the prospects for breakthroughs – or even progress – are limited in the short- to medium-term, Allies should continue to work to ensure that they are able to increase their security through defence and deterrence on the one hand, while also thinking about the future of arms control.

About the Author

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