The Lengthening Nuclear Shadow

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"May you live in interesting times" is a curse attributed to the Chinese, but whether we see it as a curse or a challenge, we must accept that the international climate, and especially relations between the US, Europe and Russia, has perceptibly changed for the worse over the last few years.

Some have nostalgia for the Cold War and its black-and-white predictability. Everybody then knew where the red lines were and that they were not to be crossed. And despite the Cold War, disarmament and arms control treaties were negotiated and concluded: progress was possible, both multilaterally as well as bilaterally between the US and the Soviet Union.

Maybe we should instead be nostalgic for the 1990s, the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the opening of the Eastern bloc. Yes, the nineties also saw savage wars and ethnic cleansing, such as in the former Yugoslavia, but it brought independence to states in the Soviet Union, it brought transparency, it saw a vastly expanded European Union, it brought a sense that anything was possible and that political developments would bring people ever closer. Twenty years later that sense has vanished, giving rise instead to anxiety and insecurity, especially on the European continent.

The deterioration in the security situation is usually attributed to recent developments: the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the challenges by Russia of Ukrainian sovereignty in the Donbass region, Syria, Brexit, vastly increasing migration into Europe, terrorism attacks, the election of US President Trump, the decisions taken by the UK and the US to modernize their nuclear forces. The knock-on effects on political stability in many European countries are palpable and not reassuring. Elections in Europe have shown deep divisions that are unsettling for the long term: will Europe hold together politically and economically?

And what are the effects of the "lengthening nuclear shadow?" Will nuclear developments matter in the years to come? What implications will there be for Europe? Is there a greater role for nuclear weapons in European security and are we facing reduced options for nuclear arms control and non-proliferation?

The post-war years have shown that mutual predictability is the essence of security: that is why we conclude treaties, why we have monitoring, why we have verification, cooperation and dialogue.

Russia has not only become unpredictable but also poses a direct challenge to international norms and principles. We are seeing interference in the political system through cyber attacks and strategic leaks in elections. The breakdown of dialogue, of strategic communications and the high risk of escalation are no longer a looming danger but an increasing probability. The challenge of today is how to address and reverse this situation.

Let us be mindful of the fact that the deterioration in US-Russian relations did not start with the annexation of Crimea.

Ten years ago, Russia already publicly questioned the utility of the INF Treaty: it was a grave mistake, Russia said, to scrap a whole class of missile weapons – as only Russia and US were allowed to possess them. The US has accused Russia of violating the INF since 2014, and the *New York Times*[1] reported on the disagreements and accusations between the US and Russia, including the first meeting (after 13 years) of the Special Verification Commission, the body established to deal with violations, including Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, who are part of the INF treaty as it was negotiated by the Soviet Union.

In March of this year, the *New York Times* reported that Russia had already deployed a significant number of prohibited missiles (in the ranges banned by the Treaty, 500–5,500km), an accusation that Russia rejected as "fake news."[2]

We also saw Russia in 2014 suspend its participation – effective after 150 days – in the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), and walk out of the Treaty's decision-making body. The suspension finalized Russia's unilateral moratorium on the implementation of the CFE treaty which President Putin declared in a decree dating from

2007. The CFE Treaty established a comprehensive structure of equal limitations on major armaments for NATO and the Warsaw Pact, but it also included important notification provisions and inspection obligations on both sides. Russia's suspension was not considered a "legally available option under the Treaty" and resulted in an "unhealthy imbalance in transparency within Europe,"[3] according to the US Mission to the OSCE.

A later agreement, the Treaty on Open Skies (2002), established a programme of unarmed observation flights over the entire territory of its participants and is one of the most wide-ranging international arms control efforts to promote openness and transparency in military forces and activities. Yet while the treaty specified the kinds of equipment the aircraft could carry, technology has outpaced the specifications (i.e. film replaced by digital imagery) and Russia, in its 2016 request to start flying over US territory, intended to include high-tech sensors on its aircraft, a move that would "violate the spirit of the treaty,"[4] according to a US official.

In March 2017, the spokesperson of Moscow's Nuclear Risk Reduction Center, Sergei Ryzhov, confirmed that Russian inspectors would conduct aerial surveillance flights over the US;[5] these flights took place in April. Yet while there may be grumbles about Russian cooperation under Open Skies, the value of these observation flights is high, and exponentially increases in times of tension. For example, the US aircraft carrying crew members from NATO members and non-NATO members on Russia's periphery, have conducted twice the number of overflights as Russia has.

Other instances of suspended cooperation can be cited: on nuclear safety and security, Russia ended almost all cooperation with the US on bilateral efforts to secure nuclear materials. The US-Russian cooperation to destroy stocks of chemical weapons – as mandated by the Chemical Weapons Convention – has also ceased.

Additionally, large-scale and long-term nuclear modernization programs have started in the US and the UK; upgrades to military capabilities are planned or ongoing in other countries that will boost the defensive systems for decades to come. Add to this the flexing of the DPRK's nuclear muscle, the Syrian conflict and the volatility introduced in the US by the election of President Trump – it has become a highly combustible mix.

The US is currently conducting a Nuclear Posture Review, which is expected to be completed at the end of this year. The last Review was done in 2010 and the security situation since then has deteriorated considerably: the world is now in disarray. There is now increased reliance on nuclear weapons, and this also drives the perception of NATO. For nuclear deterrence to be effective, a credible threat requires plausible plans for the use of nuclear weapons, a dangerous gambit in an uncertain threat environment in Europe. With Brexit, the EU will have only one nuclear power – France – and I would expect that the UK post-Brexit would work more closely with the US, perhaps integrating more with their military, to compensate for the loss of EU membership.

The European Union concluded its Global Security Strategy a year ago: it recognized that strengthening cooperation and guarantees of respect for the rules are an investment in a balanced global order. Rules are not seen as a constraint, but a guarantee that the game is played properly. They are also a guarantee of respect, observed High Representative Federica Mogherini, in a keynote address at the Carnegie Conference in Washington in March 2017.[6] She stated that the security of citizens could only be achieved through nuclear disarmament, and underlined that the Global Strategy was approved by all 28 EU members, including the two nuclear powers. She argued for continued cooperation between the US and Russia, to find common ground, and urged both countries to move on START.

Yet a year later, at the European Council meeting in June 2017, the EU showed an increased focus on defence and security issues, reflected in the Council conclusions:[7] the ground for the EU has clearly shifted as its continued prosperity and sustainability are threatened, and the EU is indicating that it will become a bigger defence player, even while stating that "the transatlantic relationship and EU-NATO cooperation remain key to our overall security, allowing us to respond to evolving security threats."[8]

The election of Donald Trump as US President has brought new concerns: he has been a reluctant partner in NATO and urged European states to contribute more financially to NATO. He has also strongly criticized Iran and grudgingly certified compliance to Congress with

the Joint Comprehensive Programme of Action (JCPOA), stating that Iran was "unquestionably in default of the spirit of the JCPOA" and imposed new sanctions[9] to penalize Iran for activities not covered by the nuclear agreement, while the European Union is strongly supportive of the JCPOA – as is Russia – and sees it as an important accord vital to security.[10]

President Trump has also brought unpredictability to long-standing established political and trade relations, such as with China, Mexico and countries in the Middle East.

We are witnessing a resurgence of unilateralism and great-power rivalry, coupled with the unravelling of domestic order in a number of countries, all of which creates instability and confrontation. In Europe, a region that strongly opposes such destabilizing developments, countries are aware of differing interpretations: what one side calls defensive deployment (such as by NATO in the Baltic states and in Poland) the other side calls offensive forces.

We need to be mindful of the fact that compared to the US (and NATO), Russia is still very small in terms of nuclear weapons, and it will certainly not give them up, but according to the latest SIRPI estimates, it has increased its military expenditure by 87% in the last ten years.[11] And contrary to the US and NATO, Russia has no allies and the level of risk-taking is very high, as there are no constraints on President Putin. The risks of conflict with Russia are real and growing.

The following questions are therefore before us: How can the situation be addressed and influenced positively? How can further back-sliding be prevented? Who are the actors and what are the elements to be included?

The first point of departure is to look at the areas in which cooperation appears to be working between the US and Russia: the Arctic Council and Antarctic cooperation are instances where pragmatism rules over the political.

Another area of cooperation is P-5 cohesion in the Non-Proliferation Treaty. There are regular meetings among the P-5 to agree on strategy concerning the non-nuclear possessors. Their dismissal of the outcome of the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Ban on Nuclear Weapons in late June further demonstrated their unity. If there is divergence with

regard to the Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the Middle East, the glue that holds the P-5 together is still very strong and will continue in the years to come. The regular meetings held in that context should be used to discuss an expanded nuclear agenda and not only NPT issues.

So what other tools can be used to exert a positive influence?

The first tool overall is the use of diplomacy. The downward spiral of mistrust and antagonism has to be halted by conducting a disciplined and constructive dialogue that aims not to disparage and accuse, but rather looks for positive connections to re-establish an Atlantic-European-Russian security order.

In an open letter addressed to Presidents Putin and Trump prior to the G-20 meeting in Hamburg in July 2017,[12] four steps were outlined to improve security:

1. A joint declaration by the US and Russia that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought;
2. Increase military-to-military communication through a new NATO-Russia Military Crisis Management Group;
3. Collaboration to prevent ISIS and other terrorist groups from acquiring nuclear and radiological materials; and
4. Reaching at least informal understandings on cyber dangers related to nuclear command and control.

The survey of leading defence and security experts, on which the recommendations were based,[13] additionally included practical steps to prevent accidents, enhance predictability, and increase confidence. These included: the request to all military aircraft to fly with transponders turned on; agreement on a "safe distance limitation" on US and Russian aircraft and ships in international airspace and waters; negotiating a reduction in notification and observation thresholds for all military exercises; and halting the "reckless nuclear rhetoric" which has come from statements by public officials and military leaders.

To this list must be added renewed engagement on two important US-Russia bilateral arms control agreements, INF and New START, both of which are in serious danger of collapse. The long-simmering disagreements regarding INF need to be more vigorously addressed in the Special Verification Commission – without shoring up the INF treaty,

it will be politically difficult, if not impossible, to extend and then renew New START.

Would it not be possible to start with experts from both sides examining the technology changes that have occurred since the conclusion of the INF treaty: how should the treaty be updated? Are there deliverables that can be negotiated at the political level?

Another consideration is multilateralising the INF, a proposal that had been made ten years ago by Russia but was never taken up. Can the potential competition between offensive and defensive systems be discussed, together with the introduction of new and destabilizing technologies? Could there be a discussion of threats that both sides share, such as more effective cooperation on the issue of terrorism, particularly ISIL, to define the targets? Can cyber attacks be discussed among the US, EU and Russia? Could there be US-Russian cooperation on space stations?

It is not all that difficult to find points of entry, provided there is political will on both sides – with the support and involvement of the EU – to move forward. With the election of a new OSCE Secretary-General from Switzerland, a non-NATO member, an additional opportunity for engagement is there.

The crucial aspect is dialogue. States must enter into direct discussions – on nuclear as well as related security issues – rather than talking at cross-purposes so much of the time. States need to re-discover the value of arms control and disarmament, for its own sake rather than as a favour to the other side. Unless all players rally to this purpose, the spiral of accusations, misjudged intentions and mistrust could easily escalate out of control. In 2012, the Doomsday Clock stood at five minutes to midnight. Today, it stands at two and a half minutes to midnight: the clock is ticking, global danger looms, and "wise public officials should act immediately, guiding humanity away from the brink;"[14] an admonition that is urgent and timely.

Endnotes

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