



Conference: Repairing the U.S.-NATO-Russia Relationship and Reducing the Risks of the Use of Nuclear Weapons

Convened by The Simons Foundation and Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada
26-28 September 2018

Conference Framework Statement

The global ideological standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union that defined the cold war is now found only in history books. Yet, after decades of seeking to establish a stable world order, a new and more complicated competition between Washington and Moscow has emerged. While different in substance, this new rivalry is no less dangerous than the one that defined the second half of the 20th century by virtue of the military capabilities of each country. Their large and growing nuclear capabilities, combined with evolving doctrines, and technology in space and cyberspace, threaten strategic and crisis stability and could result in a conflict with devastating consequences.

Fortunately, the two countries in even worse periods have successfully managed their relations through a series of interlocking agreements and confidence building measures that when fully implemented preserved stability and security. Many of these agreements are being tested both by Moscow's actions and a new disruptive approach to leadership in Washington. Skepticism and mistrust now dominate the bilateral strategic landscape. Relationships between experts, military and security officials in both countries have atrophied, and the reduced political room in both capitols to maneuver has made managing this competition more difficult. A re-doubling of governmental and non-governmental effort on both sides will be required to stop the erosion of stability and restore some semblance of stability and even areas of cooperation between the two countries.

The aim of the conference is to evaluate the current situation and develop concrete steps to advance engagement and security among the key actors. It will examine the deterioration of U.S.-Russia and NATO-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War, the causes of growing tensions among them during this period, the risks and dangers of these tensions escalating to the level of nuclear confrontation, the role and impact of pre- and post-Cold War treaties and agreements regulating their political and security relations with special focus on their impact on strategic and crisis stability, the prospects and specific steps needed to restore trust, confidence and security cooperation and reduce the risks of escalation, the geopolitical and domestic political obstacles that must be surmounted, and the roles of NATO countries in addition to the United States, particularly Canada, and civil society organizations and academics to help find common ground among the key actors. The event will go beyond the current hand-wringing that dominates the discourse, expand the understanding of how the current situation developed, and develop specific steps that can be taken to increase stability and engagement between the United States, NATO and Russia.

The most critical area of concern between Moscow and Washington is the emerging and accelerating nuclear arms race, and the risk that a conflict could spiral out of control and lead to direct military and even nuclear conflict. The burgeoning nuclear arms race, and their pursuit of associated conventional and non-kinetic capabilities, could reduce decision time available to national leaders, undermine mutual confidence in deterrence, and provide both countries with an incentive to escalate quickly to the nuclear level early in a crisis. The negative evolution of doctrines and capabilities, with a lack of contact, strategic engagement and the collapse of confidence building measures among the parties is a dangerous mix. Understanding the actual status of nuclear doctrines in both countries and encouraging sustained engagement between the strategic communities in Russia and the United States is urgently needed.

The most likely potential flash point for conflict between the United States and Russia remains Europe. Russian activities in and around their western border have significantly increased the number of military incidents that could lead to an accident or crisis. The close proximity of NATO and Russian troops, the increased reliance by Russia on flash military exercises, and Moscow's suspension of traditional norms of military behavior including planes turning off identification transponders, high-speed close intercepts between military aircraft, and ignoring naval navigation rules of engagement, has increased tension between armed military forces in the European theater. The termination of regular military to military and political engagement between NATO and Russia after the Russian incursion into Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, has made it harder to reduce the risks and tension between Russia and the West. While it may be politically difficult to return to all of the engagement opportunities that existed before the Russian annexation of parts of Ukraine, other means for engagement are possible and should be pursued. Moreover, reaffirming and when necessary redefining existing agreements and rules for engagement between Russian and western militaries should be given priority. Identifying ways to restore military-to-military engagement is clearly an important priority for experts interested in restoring crisis stability in Europe, as is enhancing Track 1.5 and Track 2 activities.

NATO and Russia should address the potential causes of and ways to avert an accident or other incident that could spin a crisis out of control. The United States and Russia must at the same time increase their efforts to preserve critical arms control agreements that have helped maintain crisis stability for almost a generation. Foremost among these are the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The United States alleges that Russia is violating this agreement by developing and reportedly deploying a new ground launched cruise missile whose ranges exceeds the treaty's allowed limit. In response, Russia has alleged that the United States is violating it by deploying missile defense launchers in Europe capable of launching long-range offensive cruise missiles. Fortunately, both Washington and Moscow claim to value the treaty and seek its preservation, yet neither side has been willing to acknowledge the validity of the others' allegations and concerns.

Non-governmental and expert engagement on this area in particular may be valuable in resolving the treaty dispute. If Russia and NATO are prepared to offer greater transparency and take steps to allay the concerns of the other party, then the treaty itself may be salvaged. Leadership by Canada and other by middle power NATO members in concert with Track 1.5 civil society efforts may facilitate progress on this front. By advancing transparency and confidence building measures that ensure that Moscow is not in possession of any treaty violating systems, and that NATO will not take steps to provide its missile defense launchers with any offensive capabilities, then the parties to the treaty may be able to resolve their dispute and reach a political agreement that extends and reinforces it.

Organization of the Conference

The Conference is co-convened by The Simons Foundation Canada and Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, under the auspices of the Simons Distinguished Visiting Fellowship in International Law and Human Security.

It will take place between 26 and 28 September, beginning with a public dialogue on the evening of 26 September, followed by two days of panel-led discussion. Successive panels will examine the deterioration of U.S.-Russia and NATO-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War, the causes of growing tensions among them during this period, the risks and dangers of these tensions escalating to the level of nuclear confrontation, the role and impact of pre- and post-Cold War treaties and agreements regulating their political and security relations with special focus on their impact on strategic and crisis stability, the prospects and specific steps needed to restore trust, confidence and security cooperation in the relationships and reduce the risks of escalation, the geopolitical and domestic political obstacles that must be surmounted, and the roles of NATO countries in addition to the United States, particularly Canada, and civil society organizations and academics to help find common ground among the key actors.

The Conference will be chaired by Dr. Bruce Blair, Co-founder of Global Zero and Research Scholar at Princeton University, and discussion will be led by Mr. Jon Wolfsthal, Director of Global Zero's Nuclear Crisis Group and President Obama's Special Assistant for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Arms Control. Dr. Blair will give the opening statement to the public on the evening of September 26.

Simon Fraser University will publish a Conference Report, which will summarize its proceedings, and include all conference papers in an appendix. It will be made available online from Simon Fraser University and online and in print from The Simons Foundation.