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Strategic Spiral: Arms Control, U.S.-Russian Relations, and European Security

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Summary

Strategic stability was a significant component of U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War. Efforts to remove incentives for the United States or Russia to launch a first nuclear strike continued to undergird the nuclear-arms regime in the early post-Cold War era. However, the geopolitical environment gradually changed, and interest in discussions around strategic stability waned.

The United States and its European allies hoped Russia would become a contributor to security in Europe rather than a challenge to it. Meanwhile, European defense capabilities atrophied and conversations on arms control lost prominence in the Euro-Atlantic space and in U.S. foreign policy thinking. New challenges posed by Iran and North Korea compounded this disinterest.

In recent years, Russia has grown increasingly confrontational. Its violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty is a case in point. In response, the United States officially withdrew from the treaty last August.

The U.S. withdrawal exemplifies a broader shift under the Trump administration to a more hardline posture toward geopolitical rivals, also including China. The U.S. response to Russia's actions, as articulated, for example, in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, seeks to signal their cost and to create an environment in which Moscow is less willing to take risks, particularly in the nuclear domain.

This shift has generated anxiety in Europe as fears of a potential confrontation have grown. These fears are aggravated by an erosion of trust in transatlantic relations, which has raised doubts about the U.S. security guarantee in some European capitals. This dynamic exacerbates existing intra-European divides driven by differing threat perceptions. All of these developments elevate the following risks.

- A further breakdown of arms-control agreements, including doubts regarding the extension of New START beyond 2021.

- A deeper deterioration in transatlantic relations further undermining the credibility of NATO deterrence, which could heighten the potential for limited conflict in Europe.
- Increased risks to strategic stability due to technological advances. This includes cyber and hybrid threats, but also nuclear-weapon modernization and missile-defense advances.

All of these factors contribute to an increased risk of accidents and miscommunication potentially leading to escalation. To mitigate these dangers, the United States and its European allies should consider the following measures.

- Step up efforts to buttress the credibility of NATO's deterrent through capability development and greater political cohesion.
- Avoid widening transatlantic divides by elevating discussions on a European nuclear deterrent. While discussions about added investment in European capabilities may open opportunities to buttress Europe's security in the long term, there is little utility in conversations about nuclear autonomy at this point, given that there is no credible alternative to the U.S. nuclear umbrella.
- Continue to invest in strategic dialogue and confidence-building measures with Russia to avoid escalation. Open communication channels in the event of a crisis will also be key. Historically, this has proven critical in deescalating tensions resulting from misunderstanding, accidents, and miscalculation.
- Devise steps to reestablish shared norms around strategic stability, which could lay the foundation for future global arms-control efforts. While the utility of bilateral agreements in a multipolar world is in question, it is unlikely that any progress toward a global arms-control framework can be made without the leadership of the United States and Russia.

Introduction

Geopolitical and technological developments over the last two decades have disrupted many long-held assumptions surrounding European and transatlantic security. The period of relative peace after 1989 has given way to persistent crises and protracted conflicts in Europe and its neighborhood that challenge the norms of the post-1989 world—from Russia’s invasion of Crimea to the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The international system is under pressure. In Europe, Russia’s behavior is a prime example, as it increasingly contests the post-Cold War status quo, the multilateral order supporting it, and the role the United States plays in European security. Although it is not the only factor, the Kremlin’s spoiler mentality has had dire consequences for key agreements governing Euro-Atlantic security.

Russia’s increased boldness has been particularly detrimental to the nuclear arms-control regime and had disastrous consequences for U.S.-Russian relations. Its violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty are a prime illustration. Russia’s disregard for this agreement, as well as others that framed Euro-Atlantic security in the post-Cold War order—such as the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty and the Budapest Memorandum—has augmented the existing trust deficit between the two countries.

In this changing geopolitical landscape, the United States under President Donald Trump is taking a more hardline approach. Its withdrawal from the INF treaty is one example that demonstrates an unwillingness to unilaterally abide by agreements in an increasingly complicated geopolitical context. And while the president uses softer rhetoric toward Russia, the administration’s broader approach has been a realist, in-kind response to Moscow’s assertive foreign policy.

This broad shift to a more confrontational policy toward Russia has generated anxiety in European capitals as fears of an arms race or conflict have grown. President Trump’s disparaging statements about NATO and European allies have further raised doubts about the reliability of the U.S. security guarantee

among some of them. This has amplified existing rifts between the transatlantic partners, even giving rise to a discussion over a potential strategic decoupling and the necessity of a European deterrent.

It is likely that other key nuclear arms-control efforts such as the extension of New START, which limits deployed strategic weapons, could fail due to several geopolitical factors. The continued disintegration of nuclear arms-control agreements that ensure transparency could increase the risk of an arms race and the potential for conflict. This spiral of developments will exacerbate Europe’s security woes, particularly if political tumult continues to rock transatlantic ties. At the same time, the growing instability of the strategic nuclear environment could have catastrophic consequences for global security as the world becomes more fragmented and contested. This paper examines how Russian, U.S., and European views toward foreign and nuclear policy have changed since the end of the Cold War, and how this impacts strategic stability, particularly in Europe. It then outlines steps to address this volatility and lower the potential for conflict.

Deteriorating Stability and the End of Assumptions

Strategic stability is generally defined as the absence of incentives for any country to launch a first nuclear strike¹ and aims to avoid “conflict situations which structurally encourage escalation between nuclear-armed adversaries.”² During the Cold War, it was the key pillar of U.S.-Soviet relations for decades. As long as both countries believed their capabilities were sufficient to serve as a deterrent, stability prevailed.

Strategic stability—backed by the doctrine of mutually assured destruction—eventually became the foundation for constructive engagement between the United States and the Soviet Union. By framing

1 Dmitri Trenin, “[Strategic Stability in the Changing World](#),” Carnegie Moscow Center, March 2019, p. 1.

2 Corentin Brustlein, “[The Erosion of Strategic Stability and the Future of Arms Control in Europe](#),” Institut français des relations internationales, November 2018, p. 23

arms-control conversations, it provided an opportunity for confidence building between them. Joint arms-control efforts underscored the need for transparency and predictability between the superpowers. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I and II), the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty (ABM), and the INF treaty demonstrated a shared understanding about the consequences of a nuclear conflict, while also trying to reduce the risk of escalation or miscalculation.

Deprioritizing Stability

As the Cold War receded into history, the United States and Russia continued to prioritize strategic stability by pursuing START I and eventually START II. A 1990 joint statement from talks on START I said that “the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as is the case in the emerging START Treaty, will, in the new negotiations, seek to reduce their strategic offensive arms in a way consistent with enhancing strategic stability.”³ In 1991, President Bush announced the unilateral reduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, which was reciprocated by Moscow. Such efforts paved the way for a new era of stability and peace in European security. But over the past two decades, the consensus on strategic stability has eroded. Today, it is increasingly difficult to find convergence between Russia and the United States to reassert it.

Europe hoped Russia might become a net contributor to the continent's security rather than a threat to it.

The bipolar order of the Cold War provided the structure and the incentive for a common approach. This changed with the unipolar moment that followed. The threat of nuclear war gave way to more immediate challenges like terrorism and crisis management in places like the Balkans.

In the nuclear domain, the United States and Europe also began to focus on other challenges, specifically those posed by Iran and North Korea. This changed the calculus on key issues undergirding the traditional Cold War thinking around strategic stability, specifically in the realm of missile defense. In 2002, the United States left the ABM treaty to establish the capability to counter threats from the Middle East, much to Russia's disdain. Moreover, as Russia's conventional forces decayed, its nuclear capability grew increasingly important.

During this same time, Europe's defense atrophied greatly. There was a perceived absence of threats on the continent, particularly as Russia's military and diplomatic capacities waned. Europe hoped Russia might become a net contributor to the continent's security rather than a threat to it.

In sum, conversations on arms control lost prominence in the Euro-Atlantic space, and particularly in U.S. foreign policy thinking. Moreover, much of transatlantic thinking was defined by utopian assumptions regarding “the end of history” and the victory of the democratic liberal international order.

Russia's Shift

The prevailing assumptions and hopes in the immediate post-Cold War period envisaged Russia democratizing and becoming a greater contributor to European security. But the country suffered significant challenges as it transitioned from its Cold War past and underwent reforms in the 1990s. Russia initially maintained a relatively cooperative foreign policy approach, but this changed after the tumult of the 1990s. It emerged emboldened by economic success in the mid-2000s and paranoid over NATO enlargement, color revolutions in post-Soviet states, and the U.S. war in Iraq.

Following a period of cooperation with the United States—most importantly in the fight against terrorism in the early 2000s—Russia grew more skeptical of U.S. ambitions. Interests began to diverge again, as the U.S. focus shifted to Iraq. When U.S. air basing in Central Asia took on a more permanent status, Russia—which

3 George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, “[Soviet-United States Joint Statement on Future Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Arms and Further Enhancing Strategic Stability](#),” June 1, 1990.

had initially supported this as a temporary measure—became increasingly alarmed.⁴

The U.S. and European failure to fully grasp Russia's growing dissatisfaction with the terms of the global order in the 1990s and 2000s came to a head. The rise of Vladimir Putin and his pivot to a grievance-laden foreign policy was famously articulated at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, where he stated: "I am convinced that we have reached that decisive moment when we must seriously think about the architecture of global security."⁵ Roughly a year and a half later, the Kremlin's dissatisfaction with regional realities and geopolitical dynamics took a dangerous turn as Russian tanks crossed into Georgia.

Putin's foreign policy shift ultimately resulted in a posture of confrontation.

Putin's foreign policy shift ultimately resulted in a posture of confrontation. As Russia sees it, the strategic priorities pursued by the United States in the past two decades put Russia at a distinct disadvantage and threatened its interests. In the nuclear domain, advances in U.S. conventional capabilities, coupled with the development of a NATO ballistic missile defense targeted against threats posed by rogue states like Iran, have exacerbated Russian paranoia regarding the resilience of its second-strike capability. While such fears are unrealistic even by Russia's own admission,⁶ they still add to the Kremlin's aggrieved rhetoric.

Consequently, while arms control and strategic stability were once a cornerstone of Russia's approach to ties with the United States, its interest in these concepts dwindled when confronted with U.S. ambitions and decisions around ballistic missile defense and interest

in advanced U.S. capabilities (for example, prompt global strike⁷). Worse, this has become another space for confrontation between the two countries. Russia's violations of the INF treaty by testing and deploying the ground-launched cruise missile 9M729 (which has a range over 500 km) and its failure to return to compliance demonstrate this dynamic clearly.

Washington's Response

Given Russia's shift and overall changes in the geopolitical environment, U.S. policymakers increasingly have felt the need to confront it. While President Barack Obama began his term seeking to reset relations with Russia, the chances for a broader rapprochement were dashed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (repeating a pattern noted under previous administrations).⁸ On the heels of this, the Obama administration made public Russia's violation of the INF treaty, which began as early as 2011 if not earlier.

The Trump administration's approach toward the INF treaty has been to dispel any notion of utility in unilateral compliance in such agreements. In February 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the United States would formally withdraw from the INF treaty, stating:

The United States has concluded that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of the Treaty arising from Russia's continued noncompliance have jeopardized the United States' supreme interests, and the United States can no longer be restricted by the Treaty while Russia openly violates it....The United States takes its treaty obligations seriously and will not stand idle when others flout their obligations. Violations of treaty obligations must have consequences.⁹

4 George Beebe, *The Russia Trap*, Thomas Dunne Books, 2019, pp. 172-173

5 Vladimir Putin, "[Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy](#)," Kremlin, February 10, 2000.

6 The Moscow Times, "[U.S. 'Cannot Stop' Russian Nuclear Missiles — Deputy Prime Minister](#)," January 26, 2015.

7 Prompt global strike is a program aimed at creating a precision guided conventional capability to strike targets globally in an hour or less.

8 Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, Princeton University Press, 2014.

9 Michael Pompeo, "[U.S. Intent to Withdraw from the INF Treaty](#)," U.S. Department of State, February 2, 2019.

During the six months between the announcement and the formal U.S. withdrawal, Russia's non-compliance continued. Despite a unified response from European countries urging Russia to adhere to a critical component of European security,¹⁰ Moscow remained uncooperative and denied that the deployment of the 9M729 constituted a breach. As a consequence, the United States formally withdrew from the treaty in August 2019.

The Trump administration is not interested in projecting stability in a way that might be exploited by other actors—a change that puts great powers on a potential collision course.

This move was part of a broader shift in Washington. The Trump administration's National Security and National Defense Strategies, published in 2017 and 2018 respectively, depict a competitive world where Russia and China actively challenge the preponderance of U.S. power, U.S. interests, and the international system itself. This shift impacts U.S. nuclear posture. For example, in the Nuclear Posture Review preface, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis argued that:

While Russia initially followed America's lead and made similarly sharp reductions in its strategic nuclear forces, it retained large numbers of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Today, Russia is modernizing these weapons as well as its other strategic systems. Even more troubling has been Russia's adoption of military strategies and capabilities that rely on nuclear escalation for their success. These developments, coupled with Russia's seizure of Crimea and nuclear threats against our

allies, mark Moscow's decided return to Great Power competition.¹¹

Similarly, in 2017, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Robert Soofer stated:

Recent years have indeed brought changes to the security environment that U.S. nuclear policy must address. Russia has undertaken aggressive actions against its neighbors and threatened the United States and its NATO Allies—including nuclear threats. It has elevated strategies of nuclear first use in its strategic thinking and military exercises, and is violating the landmark Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.¹²

These statements show that the United States no longer sees a Russia that is pursuing a common understanding of strategic stability. Rather, the Trump administration has portrayed Moscow's behavior as an attempt to gain an advantage, particularly through limited first use of low-yield nuclear weapons. While many dispute that this strategy constitutes part of Russian nuclear doctrine,¹³ the administration's response indicates that current U.S. policymakers find the scenario credible. The call for low-yield nuclear weapons as a "flexible" nuclear option in the Nuclear Posture Review to "ensure that potential adversaries perceive no possible advantage in limited nuclear escalation,"¹⁴ confirms this thinking.

In addition to the administration's decision to leave the INF treaty, their Nuclear Posture Review offers a robust U.S. response to the global threat environ-

10 North Atlantic Council, "[Statement on Russia's Failure to Comply with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#)," NATO, February 1, 2019.

11 U.S. Department of Defense, "[Nuclear Posture Review](#)," February 2018, p. I.

12 Robert Soofer, "[HASC-SF Hearing on the President's Fiscal Year 2018 Budget Request for Nuclear Forces and Atomic Energy Defense Activities](#)," U.S. House of Representatives, May 25, 2017.

13 For more on this, see Olga Oliker and Andrey Baklitskiy, "[The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian 'De-Escalation': A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem](#)," War on the Rocks, February 20, 2018.

14 U.S. Department of Defense, "[Nuclear Posture Review](#)," p. XII.

ment. This includes developing and deploying tactical nuclear weapon capabilities and reiterating the option of using nuclear weapons in a non-nuclear strategic attack. According to recent reports, NATO allies are now also contemplating expanding their ballistic missile defense to address Russian intermediate-range missiles in the post-INF world. While it is unlikely that the alliance will reach a consensus on this issue, this shows how much the conversation has changed. Ironically, Russia's behavior has led NATO members to consider establishing a capability similar to the one it miscategorized the current ballistic missile defense systems on the alliance's southern flank to be.

The shift in the U.S. approach is a reaction to larger geopolitical changes but must also be put in context with Russia's behavior in places like Syria, Ukraine, and Venezuela, its ambivalence toward international agreements, and its coercive nuclear posture. The Trump administration is attempting to address a reality that they see as being ignored for too long by clarifying the cost of such behavior and creating an environment in which Russia is less willing to take risks, particularly in the nuclear domain. As the Nuclear Posture Review states,

Russia's belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide such an advantage is based, in part, on Moscow's perception that its greater number and variety of non-strategic nuclear systems provide a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict. Recent Russian statements on this evolving nuclear weapons doctrine appear to lower the threshold for Moscow's first-use of nuclear weapons. Russia demonstrates its perception of the advantage these systems provide through numerous exercises and statements. Correcting this mistaken Russian perception is a strategic imperative.¹⁵

The U.S. withdrawal from the INF treaty also constitutes an attempt to reconcile this reality with the

growing strategic ambitions of China, which experts believe "has the most advanced conventional missile arsenal in the world."¹⁶ Wary of the threat China poses, U.S. officials currently see little utility in an agreement that limits development by the United States of intermediate range ground-based missiles, but leaves China unchecked.

The Trump administration is not interested in projecting stability in a way that might be exploited by other actors—a change that puts great powers on a potential collision course. Given perceptions of Russian doctrine and capabilities, this could have especially dire consequences in Europe, where tensions could escalate quickly.

European Security in an Unstable World

The broader shift in U.S. policy has complicated transatlantic relations and added to divisions within Europe. This unfortunately ultimately aids Russia and provides it with additional space to sow distrust and undermine resolve within the alliance, while also muddying the waters on NATO's extended deterrence. While European NATO members uniformly condemned Russia's INF breaches and supported the United States' decision to withdraw from the treaty in an official statement in February 2019,¹⁷ a closer look at domestic debates on nuclear issues and transatlantic relations in the run-up and aftermath of the U.S. announcement reveals a less unified picture within Europe.

These intra-European rifts are impacted by diverging national perspectives on many issues, including varying threat perceptions and differing views toward strategic deterrence. Many of these differences precede the policies of the Trump administration, while others have been heightened since 2016. For several allies, President Trump's rhetoric on NATO has undermined the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee, including the nuclear deterrent.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. XII.

¹⁶ David E. Sanger and Edward Wong, "U.S. Ends Cold War Missile Treaty, With Aim of Countering China," *The New York Times*, August 1, 2019.

¹⁷ North Atlantic Council, "Statement on Russia's Failure."

Given that Russian intermediate nuclear weapons can reach almost all of Europe, but not the U.S. mainland, some European countries have long feared a strategic decoupling if the United States decided not to come to the defense of Europe if Russia were to attack a NATO ally—for instance, in the Baltics. President Trump’s hostile rhetoric toward certain U.S. allies has done little to assuage these fears. The potential use of low-yield weapons outlined in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review is designed to prevent such a scenario, by allowing the United States to respond in a more proportional manner if Russia were to use its tactical nuclear weapons in a conflict. However, this shift, coupled with recent U.S. military wargaming staging a limited nuclear battle against Russia, makes the prospect of limited nuclear war in Europe more plausible,¹⁸ which has been a perennial concern for Europe. Whether or not either Moscow or Washington can accurately understand signaling and control movements on the escalation ladder in a crisis scenario—preventing a conflict from going strategic—is another argument altogether.

This section takes a closer look at European reactions to the security environment over the past few years and assesses how divergences across Europe—specifically between Eastern and Western European countries—are adding to tensions in the transatlantic context. Ultimately, these divisions have implications for Europe’s own approach to strategic stability on the continent.

Poland and the Baltic States

Not least due to Donald Trump’s disparaging remarks about NATO during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, his election victory was received tepidly across most European capitals. While many took a wait-and-see approach, unsure whether his critical rhetoric toward Europe would translate into corresponding policy, Poland sought to preserve and even bolster bilateral relations with the United States after

Trump was elected. On the INF treaty, Polish officials were quick to express their support when President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the treaty. Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz not only agreed that Russia was violating the treaty but questioned the utility of the agreement under such circumstances.¹⁹ Yet, Poland still believes in the utility of other arms-controls agreements. In a statement to the United Nations in October 2019, its permanent representative to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, Marcin Czepelak, expressed hope that the United States and Russia would extend New START beyond 2021.²⁰

From the perspective of the Baltic states, which have long felt the threat of Russian missiles, the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty has not altered the status quo significantly.

Officials from the Baltic states similarly condemned the Russian INF violations, but did not discuss the termination of the treaty as openly as their Polish counterparts did.²¹ From the perspective of the Baltic states, which have long felt the threat of Russian missiles, the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty has not altered the status quo significantly—except, as Latvia’s Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics asserted, on the “symbolic” level.²² This is in part due to the fact that the Baltic states are already concerned about the use of lower-range tactical weapons that were not limited by INF stipulations.

18 Julian Borger, “US staged ‘limited’ nuclear battle against Russia in war game,” *The Guardian*, February 24, 2020.

19 Monika Sieradzka, “Poland Supports U.S. Withdrawal from INF,” *Deutsche Welle*, October 25, 2018.

20 Marcin Czepelak, “Statement at the 74th United Nations General Assembly: First Committee Thematic Debate On Nuclear Weapons,” October 22, 2019.

21 Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, Tara Varma, and Nick Witney, “Eyes Tight Shut: European Attitudes Towards Nuclear Deterrence,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 2018.

22 Amy Mackinnon, “The End of an Era,” *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2019.

Geographic proximity sharpens Polish and Baltic perceptions of the threat posed by Russia's behavior. The presence of Russian nuclear-capable missiles in Kaliningrad since October of 2016 have greatly added to Eastern European threat perceptions. While these missiles could reach as far as Germany, the threat for Poland and the Baltic states is especially dire. Moreover, they not only view Russia as a nuclear threat, but are also wary of its conventional capabilities in the region.

Russia's ability to complicate air access in the region through its air-defense and electronic-warfare capabilities exacerbates this difficult reality. These systems threaten the operability of Polish airbases and naval access to the region, which limits NATO's options to come to the defense of Eastern Europe and the Baltic states and could leave the region exposed. In such a scenario, the Baltic states are particularly worried about being cut-off from U.S. and NATO reinforcements. Analysis and war-gaming scenarios focused on the Baltic states demonstrate how difficult reinforcing the region would be. They also raise the potential for an "escalatory spiral" in trying to recapture the region, reaching the level of strategic nuclear exchange.²³

Consequently, Poland and the Baltic states are eager to increase conventional NATO and U.S. capabilities in the region beyond rotational forces under the alliance's Enhanced Forward Presence—which they believe would add to NATO's deterrence posture. According to a 2018 survey of public opinion across Europe on nuclear issues by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), these countries see no viable alternative to the U.S. security guarantee and are committed to preserving relations with the United States at all costs.²⁴ Poland's efforts to foster bilateral relations have yielded tangible results, helping to bring about an agreement to create a more permanent U.S. troop presence in the country.

While these countries are committed to creating more nuclear stability through deterrence, this has so far stopped short of hosting U.S. nuclear weapons, although the United States has not made any official overtures to elicit such steps either.²⁵ However, Poland's President Andrzej Duda suggested in 2018 that "Poland would be prepared to station U.S. medium-range missiles on its soil," if the INF treaty were to be terminated.²⁶ And Lithuanian officials have indicated that they would not rule out the possibility of stationing additional nuclear weapons on European territory to counter Russia's missile systems.²⁷ In February 2019, Lithuania's Defense Minister Raimundas Karoblis implied that NATO should also counter Russia's tactical capabilities like the Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad more forcefully. He argued that additional nuclear capabilities in Europe could be one of the deterrence measures to meet that threat.²⁸

The Baltic states and Poland are at odds with Western European countries like France and Germany that do not share the same threat perceptions.

The Baltic states and Poland are at odds with Western European countries like France and Germany that do not share the same threat perceptions. This difference is visible in Poland's reservations toward European defense efforts outside of NATO, which are driven by France. It is also reflected in these states' attitudes toward U.S. security guarantees. According to ECFR's survey, more people in Poland and the Baltic states say they believe in the credibility of U.S. commitments than in many other countries.²⁹ In fact, people in Estonia and Poland say that this credibility

23 David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank," RAND, 2016, p. 7.

24 Lafont Rapnouil, Varma, and Witney, "Eyes tight shut",

25 Ibid.

26 Sieradzka, "Poland supports U.S. Withdrawal."

27 Teri Schultz, "Lithuania: NATO should step up in post-INF reality," Atlantic Council, March 4, 2019.

28 Ibid.

29 Lafont Rapnouil, Varma, and Witney, "Eyes tight shut."

increased under President Trump.³⁰ This suggests that Poland and the Baltics value U.S. material commitments, which have been strong during his presidency, over rhetoric.³¹

The United Kingdom

Proximity to Russia is not as essential to the United Kingdom's deterrence calculus, although its leadership of the multinational battlegroup in Estonia as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence increases its stake in Baltic security. Nonetheless, the United Kingdom forcefully backed the United States' decision to withdraw from the INF treaty. In October 2018, Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson said that London would stand "absolutely resolute with the United States in hammering home a clear message that Russia needs to respect the treaty obligation that it signed," and accused Russia of making a "mockery" of the treaty.³²

It is highly unlikely that the United Kingdom would consider a European deterrent as an alternative to U.S. security guarantees.

Several underlying factors contribute to this stance. First, it is one of five official nuclear weapon states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. It is also among the European states that are most supportive of nuclear deterrence and weighs nuclear threats above other conventional and non-conventional threats. Even though it has an independent nuclear deterrent, it has reduced its nuclear arsenal since the Cold War with the goal of creating a

"minimum deterrent"³³ and it recognizes the need for the U.S. nuclear umbrella as a deterrent against Russia.

As with Poland and Estonia, the 2018 ECFR polls shows that people in the United Kingdom believe that U.S. security guarantees have become more credible under Trump.³⁴ Given this, the United Kingdom's support for the Trump administration's announcement was not surprising.

At the time, Williamson also stressed that the United Kingdom wants "to see [the INF] treaty continue to stand" and urged Russia "to get its house in order"—language much more in line with Western European NATO members. This is indicative of the United Kingdom's efforts to balance its relationship with the EU, even while aligning itself with the United States. Given the "special relationship" with the United States and in light of Brexit, it has been cautiously supportive of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Successive governments have emphasized that such efforts should complement NATO and strengthen European military capabilities within the alliance, not independently of it. Even though the United Kingdom has expressed interest in continuing to participate in CSDP operations post-Brexit as a "third party" without veto power, it can be expected that it will further prioritize NATO and continue to place greater weight on relations with the United States. Therefore, it is also highly unlikely that the United Kingdom would consider a European deterrent as an alternative to U.S. security guarantees.

France

While France officially supported the U.S. decision to withdraw from the INF treaty, President Emmanuel Macron's rising frustrations with the Trump administration's tendency to make unilateral decisions affecting European Allies have become increasingly clear. After initial diplomatic efforts to halt the withdrawal process through private pleas stressing the

30 Ibid.

31 Marco Overhaus, "Eine Frage der Glaubwürdigkeit: Konventionelle und nukleare Sicherheitszusagen der USA in Europa," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2019, p. 34.

32 Press Association, "UK backs Trump withdrawal from Russia nuclear treaty," The Guardian, October 21, 2018.

33 Ministry of Defense, United Kingdom "The UK's nuclear deterrent: What you need to know," February 19, 2018.

34 Lafont Rapnouil, Varma, and Witney, "Eyes tight shut."

importance of the treaty to European allies failed, Macron struck a more aggressive tone. In November 2019, he said that “The INF treaty was revoked by the United States, but I remind you that it’s our security which is at stake. That of our European allies [...] We can’t outsource our security to a bilateral agreement in which no European is a stake-holder.”³⁵ In February 2020, Macron took this one step further, arguing that “strategic stability in Europe requires more than the comfort provided by a transatlantic convergence with the United States.” French security, he argued, “thus depends on our ability to involve ourselves more autonomously in our Eastern and Southern neighborhood.”³⁶ Macron, further elaborated on his view of a waning strategic stability in today’s world. “Unlike France and its allies, some States are knowingly opting for opaque and even aggressive nuclear postures, which include a dimension of blackmailing of seeking *fait accompli*,” he said. “The deterrent-based power balances have thus become unstable.”

The different visions of Macron and Trump for transatlantic security are precipitating a broad estrangement in the partnership. Since Macron took office, France has demonstrated its desire for a Europe more autonomous from the United States with a resilient European defense sector—an effort that has found little support in Eastern Europe and the United Kingdom. In recent months, this transatlantic and intra-European divergence has become increasingly clear.

French views toward Russia add to the growing divide in transatlantic and intra-European relations. In late 2019, Macron strongly argued for the need to reset relations with Russia to prevent an alliance between it and China. He has even gone so far to say that he does not see Russia as a “common enemy”

of NATO.³⁷ Macron’s views on Russia are not in sync with those of many other alliance members—especially in Eastern Europe. His plea to consider Russian proposals for a moratorium on the deployment of short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe was not received well across the Atlantic either. While some allies—like Germany—are more receptive to the substance of his argument for increased European responsibility, they have been angered by Macron’s unilateral approach and his divisive comments.³⁸ This includes his assessment that NATO is “brain dead.”³⁹

Macron’s views on Russia are not in sync with those of many other alliance members—especially in Eastern Europe.

France is among the European countries whose public says that the U.S. nuclear security guarantee has become less credible during the Trump presidency.⁴⁰ In line with this, Macron has pursued bilateral agreements like the French-German Treaty of Aachen, which commits both countries to mutual defense—theoretically extending into the nuclear domain. Moreover, he has recently made overtures to Germany to discuss the European dimension of France’s nuclear deterrent on a more strategic level. Like the United Kingdom, France is one of the five official nuclear weapon countries. However, it is the only NATO country that does not participate in the alliance’s Nuclear Planning Group. It has traditionally considered its nuclear deterrent a strictly national force—even though its 2017 Strategic Review on

35 Reuters, “[France’s Macron denies accepting Putin’s missile proposal](#),” November 18, 2019.

36 Emmanuel Macron, “[Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy](#),” February 7, 2020.

37 Patrick Wintour and Bethan McKernan, “[Macron Defends ‘brain-dead Nato’ Remarks as Summit Approaches](#),” The Guardian, November 28, 2019.

38 Helene Fouquet and Ian Wishart, “[Emmanuel Macron Has an Algorithm for Taking Control of Europe](#),” Bloomberg, November 26, 2019.

39 The Economist, “[Emmanuel Macron in His Own Words \(English\)](#),” November 7, 2019.

40 Lafont Rapnouil, Varma, and Witney, “Eyes tight shut.”

Defense and National Security acknowledges that its arsenal contributes to NATO's "overall deterrence capability."⁴¹ Nuclear threats play an important role in the document, which characterizes France's nuclear deterrent as "the keystone of the Nation's defense strategy," emphasizing its growing importance in the current geopolitical environment.⁴²

When it comes to deterring Russia (or other powers), France has less to lose—albeit still plenty—in a decoupling scenario than many other European allies.

Given France's independent nuclear capabilities, it is perhaps not surprising that Macron has been less restrained in challenging the status quo and voicing his criticism of the United States, while being more amenable to dialogue with Russia. Ironically, there seems to be common ground with President Trump on the latter point, if not with the rest of his administration. When it comes to deterring Russia (or other powers), France has less to lose—albeit still plenty—in a decoupling scenario than many other European allies. Macron's mounting skepticism toward the United States makes it conceivable—although still unlikely—that France would at some point seek to formalize its nuclear-sharing agreements to help create a European deterrent—an idea that has been discussed in some policy circles, though it largely has been discredited as unfeasible. In fact, Germany's Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer in February revealed that her country and France are planning to discuss the role of the latter's nuclear capabilities (and the joint nuclear-capable fighter project) in European deterrence on a more strategic level, although she suggested that she did not anticipate Germany leaving the U.S. nuclear

umbrella.⁴³ Under the current conditions, there is no scenario in which pooled European resources could replace the U.S. nuclear umbrella to establish a credible deterrent, though some experts have argued that France could provide "complementary insurance for European NATO members."⁴⁴

Germany

Germany's position on nuclear deterrence is complicated and conflicted. The country has benefitted from NATO's nuclear umbrella and hosts tactical U.S. nuclear weapons as part of the alliance's nuclear-sharing agreement. It is also a staunch supporter of arms control. Despite strong support among the public, the government has stopped short of ratifying the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which seeks their total elimination. Nonetheless, the end of the INF treaty was widely portrayed as a disastrous development in official circles, the media, and public debate.

Germany's response focused mostly on renewed efforts to bring Russia into compliance to safeguard the treaty. Public discourse frequently equated the ultimate demise of treaty with the beginning of a new arms race threatening European security and strategic stability. Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was particularly strong in his rebuke; for example, saying that "The Cold War times have passed. We don't need a rearmament debate, we need a debate about disarming [...] European security will not be improved by deploying more nuclear-armed, medium-range missiles."⁴⁵

The decision by Maas, a Social Democrat, to rule out options without consulting with the cabinet and NATO allies drew criticism—especially from Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats. However,

41 Republic of France, "[Defence And National Security Strategic Review 2017](#)," p. 15.

42 Ibid.

43 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, "[Berlin will mit Paris über Atomwaffen reden](#)," February 21, 2020.

44 Bruno Tertrais, "[The European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence: French and British Policies and Future Scenarios](#)," Finnish Institute for International Affairs, November 2018.

45 Christiane Hoffman, and Christoph Schult, "[German Foreign Minister Maas: 'Trump Could Hardly Have Chosen a Worse Moment'](#)," Spiegel Online, January 11, 2019.

concerns about a new nuclear arms race are shared across all German parties. Merkel was more measured in her response, but her 2019 Munich Security Conference speech still revealed frustration about U.S. unilateral tendencies. She said:

For us Europeans, if I may be so bold, the really bad news this year was the announcement of the cancelling of the INF Treaty [which] leaves us with a very interesting constellation: a treaty that was essentially designed for Europe, an arms reduction treaty that directly affects our security, has been cancelled by the United States of America and Russia (the legal successor to the Soviet Union). And we are left sitting there.⁴⁶

These less-than-enthusiastic responses to the INF treaty's expiration are in line with Germany's views toward nuclear policy and the threat posed by Russia. The 2016 White Paper on German Security Policy highlights the "incalculable risks" posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.⁴⁷ While German policymakers see Russia as less of a threat than Eastern European counterparts, they fear that an increase in nuclear, as well as conventional capabilities—especially in Eastern Europe—would make them less secure and could provoke Russia, leading to an escalation.⁴⁸ The country's experts and politicians sense growing strategic instability and hope that future arms-control efforts could help counter this. Given this, German officials have been explicit in their hopes that, as Foreign Minister Maas put it in 2019, Russia and the United States will "preserve the New START Treaty as a cornerstone of global arms control" and that other nuclear powers

such as China "must face up to their responsibility in the area of arms control."⁴⁹

While German policymakers see Russia as less of a threat than Eastern European counterparts, they fear that an increase in nuclear capabilities would make them less secure.

However, views on how best to respond to the perceived insecurity is mixed. Among the German public, trust in the U.S. nuclear guarantee has decreased since Trump took office.⁵⁰ In one November 2019 poll, 40 percent of respondents said Germany should seek nuclear protection from France and the United Kingdom and only 22 percent from the United States. More significant yet, 31 percent said Germany should forego nuclear protection altogether.⁵¹ Another 2019 poll had 67 percent of respondents saying they strongly favor the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany.⁵² This critical view toward nuclear weapons in the German public is not new. It dates back to the rise of the anti-nuclear movement in the early 1970s and the public backlash against the government's support of NATO's dual-track decision in 1979. With this move, NATO introduced the deployment of additional intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Western Europe to counter Soviet deployment of intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Although the aim was to pressure the Soviet Union to open new arms-control negotiations—ultimately leading to the signing of the INF treaty in 1987—the decision fueled widespread

46 Angela Merkel, "[Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel zur 55. Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz am 16. Februar 2019 in München](#)," February 16, 2019.

47 Federal Government, Germany, "[Weißbuch 2016: Zur Sicherheitspolitik und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr](#)," 2016, p. 41.

48 Buras and Janning, "Divided at the Centre."

49 Foreign Office, Germany, "[Foreign Minister Maas on the end of the INF Treaty](#)," August 1, 2019.

50 Lafont Rapnouil, Varma, and Witney, "Eyes tight shut."

51 Jacek Czaputowicz, Fu Ying, Brett McGurk, and Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. "[The Berlin Pulse 2019/2020: German Foreign Policy in Perspective](#)," Körber Stiftung, November 2019, p. 37.

52 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, "[Polls: Public Opinion in EU Host States Firmly Opposes Nuclear Weapons](#)," April 24, 2019.

anger among the German public and poisoned future debates on nuclear policy.

Without a substitute European deterrent force, the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons would exponentially enhance Russia's ability to coerce the continent to achieve a broad spectrum of goals. This leaves Germany in a difficult position. It faces a dual challenge—traditional opposition to nuclear proliferation coupled with increased distrust in the United States under President Trump's leadership.⁵³

The Trump administration's divisive rhetoric and trade policy have greatly affected German security perceptions. But while the population may be increasingly sympathetic to the idea of an alternative to U.S. security guarantees, there is real skepticism about a strategic split in policy circles. In line with this, Foreign Minister Maas asserted last November that Germany is not receptive to the idea of a European deterrent as an alternative to NATO.⁵⁴ Defense Minister Kramp-Karrenbauer's remarks regarding French-German cooperation and the continued importance of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, confirm this.

Dangers and Challenges to Strategic Stability

The U.S.-Russian rivalry in the current geopolitical context poses a significant danger for global strategic stability and for European security. Yet, the role of European NATO members actively participating in nuclear sharing across the alliance or benefitting from its nuclear umbrella also makes them important players contributing to extended deterrence. Against this backdrop, comments that overplay the desire for European strategic autonomy and heighten divisions between Europe and the United States—on nuclear and other issues—may lead Russia to question NATO's resolve and the willingness of the United States to come to the defense of its European allies. This could have severe consequences. Until European countries

can devise a viable and credible alternative to the U.S. security guarantee to keep Russia in check, greater transatlantic coordination should take priority.

While this ambiguity can be useful for Moscow, it can be extremely dangerous and increase the chances of miscalculation.

The broader context of U.S.-Russian and NATO-Russian relations has only further reinforced a problematic dynamic. Russia's rejection of the post-Cold War European security order, emphasized by its inclination to violate, exploit, or disregard international agreements is a case in point. Besides violations of the INF treaty, specific examples include Russia's withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty, violations of the Budapest Memorandum,⁵⁵ and exploitation of the spirit of agreements like the Vienna Document.⁵⁶ This has not only eroded the trust of European countries and the United States; it also muddies the waters as to what are Russia's overarching strategy, intentions, and interests. While this ambiguity can be useful for Moscow, it can be extremely dangerous and increase the chances of miscalculation.

Russia's nuclear policy (and perceptions thereof), reliance on hybrid warfare, and engagement in conflicts across multiple regions—all of which indicate that Russia perceives an inherently high level of strategic stability—increase the risk for confrontation. This is especially true as the United States has shifted its approach toward Russia to a more confrontational one across multiple domains. For U.S. and European policymakers, Russia's perceived willingness to go on the offensive and use tactically confusing, exploitive, and ambiguous measures—as it has done with cyberattacks in Estonia, Russian irregular and mercenary

53 Czapatovicz et al., "The Berlin Pulse."

54 Zeit Online, "Heiko Maas verteidigt die Nato gegen Macrons Kritik," November 10, 2019.

55 Steven Pifer, "The Budapest Memorandum and U.S. Obligations," Brookings, December 4, 2014.

56 Lee Litzenberger, "Beyond Zapad 2017: Russia's Destabilizing Approach to Military Exercises," War on the Rocks, November 28, 2017.

troops engaging U.S. troops in Syria, and the violation of Turkish airspace leading to the shooting down of a Russian jet—is particularly worrisome. Current developments in Idlib should also cause concern about spillover and escalation.

Russia’s aggressive policy in multiple domains and regions, the United States’ response, and Europe’s combination of poor conventional capabilities and skepticism toward U.S. leadership could lead to catastrophic outcomes.

The security environment in Europe—including strategic stability—is eroding as a result. Russia’s aggressive policy in multiple domains and regions, the United States’ response, which includes withdrawal from the INF treaty and the Nuclear Posture Review’s focus on low-yield nuclear weapons, and Europe’s combination of poor conventional capabilities and skepticism toward U.S. leadership all contribute to this erosion and could lead to catastrophic outcomes. As the Euro-Atlantic security architecture is further strained, the following dynamics are of particular salience and concern.

A deeper deterioration in transatlantic relations

Deterrence-theory pioneer Robert Jervis has argued that “deterrence depends on perceptions.”⁵⁷ Given this, a core component of addressing Russia’s challenge to European security and NATO is to ensure that it cannot perceive a victory in challenging U.S. forces in Europe or NATO. A misperception in this regard would carry a significant chance for escalation. To safeguard strategic stability, there can be no notion of limited victory—conventional or unconventional.

Current political divisions between NATO member states undermine the clarity of resolve and unity of the

alliance in the face of Russian aggression. The lack of European confidence in the U.S. mutual defense guarantee is a significant danger. A further deterioration in transatlantic relations could exacerbate doubts about the U.S. nuclear strategic umbrella, particularly if President Trump again questions the Article V commitment in NATO. Without the U.S. guarantee, Europe stands exposed to a range of aggressive behavior.

Aggression Leading to Escalation

Limited conventional conflict may arise between nuclear powers if they believe that the use of nuclear weapons would be so mutually costly that neither would employ them even if conventional conflict were to arise. While always a risk inherent to relations between the United States and the Russia (and the Soviet Union earlier), the latter’s present behavior risks tipping the scale. More specifically, Russia’s aggressive posture and hybrid/unconventional challenges against NATO allies indicate that it perceives an inherently high level of strategic stability between the major superpowers that it can exploit—but it risks miscalculating the actual state of strategic stability.⁵⁸

The Trump administration has tried to reshape U.S. nuclear and conventional doctrine, indicating that the United States is increasingly adamant about dispelling Russia and other would-be challengers of the notion that they can gain limited operational successes through nuclear coercion. The administration’s Nuclear Posture Review shows that the United States continues to create ambiguity about what would necessitate nuclear use, stating that: “The United States would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners. Extreme circumstances could include significant non-nuclear strategic attacks.”⁵⁹

If Russia assumes the current environment allows for tactical and operational military successes backed

57 Robert Jervis, “Deterrence and Perception,” *International Security*, 7(3), 1982.

58 Christopher Chivvis, Andrew Radin, Dara Massicot, and Clint Reach, “Strengthening Strategic Stability with Russia,” Rand, 2017.

59 U.S. Department of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review,” p. 21.

by its nuclear doctrine—or if the United States believes it does—current changes in the U.S. posture may come into direct conflict with such assumptions, leading to catastrophic results.

Accidents and Miscommunication Leading to Escalation

Another dangerous challenge facing the U.S.-Russian relationship and European security in the current context are accidents. In addition to previously discussed cases, Russia's assertive behavior has resulted in numerous counts of aggressive interactions between Russian and NATO aircraft, the buzzing of U.S. naval vessels, and aggressive at-sea maneuvers near U.S. vessels. Given this dynamic and the extreme recklessness of some of these Russian actions, there is a plausible risk for escalation stemming from an accident.

Russia could respond to a conventional attack by using nuclear weapons if it is unable to determine the payload of a system being used.

Assumptions inherent in U.S. policy today about Russian nuclear doctrine—particularly the willingness to more quickly release low-yield nuclear weapons to protect its interests—could also have serious consequences in a crisis. Moreover, the various dual-use systems that can carry conventional and nuclear payloads make it more possible to misinterpret an aggressor's intent. Russia could respond to a conventional attack by using nuclear weapons if it is unable to determine the payload of a system being used.

Previous incidents such as the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1983 Able Archer NATO exercise have demonstrated how easy it can be to misread events or how difficult it can be to halt escalation or take steps down the escalation ladder. Particularly in an era where communications between Russia and the United States are strained and conflict is happening in gray zones and via proxies, the chances for acci-

dents or miscommunication leading to escalation could increase. The clash in early 2018 between U.S. troops and the Russian mercenary Wagner Group in Syria demonstrates this dangerous dynamic. Despite warnings from the U.S. side and attempts to use deconflicting channels to avoid engaging with Russian personnel, several Russians were killed.

The Challenge of Technological Advances

Technological developments provide an additional risk for a potential tactical and strategic nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia by accelerating the timeframe for decision making and increasing ambiguity on several levels. This is particularly true in the realm of cyber, where an attack intended to remain under the threshold of kinetic conflict could quickly spin out of control. Cyberattacks that intentionally or unintentionally affect critical infrastructure and military command-and-control centers⁶⁰ could escalate into nuclear conflict if they are perceived as a vital threat to key national interests and defense posture. Moreover, the difficulty of attribution in the cyber domain could have severe ramifications. This is particularly salient given Russia's use of hybrid or cross-domain tools to achieve foreign policy goals. At the same time, technological advances—particularly in U.S. conventional capabilities and potential space-based interceptors⁶¹—could add to Russia's anxiety regarding its second-strike capability and could encourage a hair-trigger first-launch reflex.

A Breakdown of Bilateral and Multilateral Frameworks

The rise of China also changes the calculus of the Trump administration toward arms control. Current reports indicate the Trump administration will balk on extending New START, which is set to expire in 2021. In short, this demonstrates that administration officials think they can either get a better deal or

60 U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review," p. 57.

61 U.S. Department of Defense, "[Missile Defense Review](#)," 2019, p. 37.

a more inclusive agreement that would also address tactical weapons.⁶² Short of this, there is little interest signaled by the administration to resume arms control talks with Russia unless they are part of a broader agreement.

Overall, the current administration's perceptions regarding the utility of bilateral and multilateral agreements have altered the U.S. approach, particularly when it comes to Russia. For example, the United States is now also threatening to leave the Treaty on Open Skies—which aims at mutual transparency—arguing it is exploited by Russia and disadvantageous to itself in its current form.⁶³ Whether such steps are warranted or not, a further breakdown in these transparency measures risks exacerbating relations, increasing space for confrontation or accidental escalation.

The Path Forward

The end of the INF treaty is indicative of a broader erosion of the Cold War and post-Cold War strategic stability culture. It also represents a break with established assumptions undergirding the European security order. Russia's rejection of the post-Cold War status quo and its aggressive foreign policy are a cause and a symptom of this. Actions taken by the United States and Europe to deprioritize strategic stability in the late 1990s and mid-2000s created the space for Russia's more assertive measures, particularly as Russia's own geopolitical position was waning. This has led to a new era in geopolitics in which Russia and the United States are not the only players in global strategic stability, but because of the history and their arsenals, they are an essential component of it. For Europe, their role in this arena is existential.

While the threats to strategic stability in the current geopolitical environment are evident, the options to escape this volatile situation are less so. The road

ahead for confidence-building measures or arms-control efforts in U.S.-Russian relations will be difficult.

Russia's actions demonstrate little interest to reconsider its approach toward the use of nuclear weapons (for example, development and deployment of intermediate-range systems). Its actions in the nuclear domain are used to protect its standing as a great power, despite and because of its diminishing influence. Whether or not a coercive use of nuclear capabilities can remain effective, depends on advances in conventional counter-strike capabilities and a range of other technologies that may undermine traditional notions of strategic deterrence.

Shoring Up Transatlantic Credibility

Strategic stability requires a credible deterrent and different confidence-building mechanisms. To retain credibility in transatlantic deterrence (in the conventional and strategic domains), the partners must jointly pursue added capability development while also joining in a robust approach to tackle issues of political cohesion across the Atlantic.

With this in mind, it is critical that the NATO allies take a levelheaded approach to transatlantic politics, understanding the real risks posed by the current geopolitical security environment. The United States needs reliable partners to tackle a variety of global geopolitical challenges and Europe needs the United States to help address some of the extremely difficult and prohibitively expensive challenges to the continent's security, as well as the global challenges they face. This is particularly true in the nuclear realm, which constitutes a significant threat and challenge for Europe—not just through the actual use of nuclear weapons, but also through the potential coercive application of Russia's nuclear doctrine to achieve localized gains.

If transatlantic relations deteriorate to a point at which the United States is no longer willing to guarantee European security or if its guarantee is no longer credible for Europeans, Europe may have to find ways to create more autonomous defense capabilities in the long term. Although an independent European

62 Daryl Kimball, "A New Nuclear Deal? Start with a New START", Defense One, December 5, 2019.

63 Joe Gould and Aaron Mehta, "U.S. to Europe: Fix Open Skies Treaty or We Quit," Defense News, November 21, 2019.

nuclear deterrent is far from feasible at the moment, Europeanizing the U.K. and/or French nuclear arsenal could be an eventual option, albeit an unlikely one.

At this point, it seems quixotic for Europe to try muster the resources and political will needed to build the infrastructure, command structure, and personnel to make an independent nuclear deterrent possible. Moreover, this would be at the expense of developing conventional capability, which is sorely needed. And even if Europe were to be successful in developing the necessary strategic capabilities, building intra-European trust and pan-European political will would be a challenge. Given differing perspectives across Europe, it is likely that credibility issues would persist. Would a Europeanized French deterrent reassure the Baltic countries against the threat posed by Russia? Would Russia believe there is convergence around a united European political will? If not, Europe would likely suffer from various Russian foreign policy pressures. This is particularly true given a deficient European conventional capability.

The United Kingdom's exit from the EU may further complicate this picture. But from a long-term perspective, added European nuclear capabilities cannot be entirely ruled out—even if they are only complementary to NATO. This could also alleviate a broad range of concerns regarding limited nuclear conflict in Europe, if it is politically credible. However, any step toward that end should be taken incrementally and in coordination with the United States to ensure that Europe is not exposed to a number of threats.

Strategic Stability in the Era of Multipolarity

U.S. and Russian nuclear policy should be guided by common norms and ensure there are open communication channels that decrease the chance for accidental, inadvertent, or deliberate escalation. With this in mind, it is encouraging that both sides continue to participate in an official U.S.-Russian Strategic Dialogue to “reduce misunderstandings and misper-

ceptions on key security issues.”⁶⁴ At a January 2020 meeting, delegations led by U.S. Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation Christopher A. Ford and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov agreed to “hold additional consultations as needed” and to “begin expert-level engagement.” Given the threat that nuclear weapons pose, such dialogue is critical.

U.S. and Russian nuclear policy should be guided by common norms and ensure there are open communication channels that decrease the chance for accidental or deliberate escalation.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that future arms-control efforts will have to account for other powers such as China. Moreover, as this paper has noted, many of the traditional assumptions around nuclear weapons are changing. However, the current volatility in the strategic environment may serve as an incentive to globally rethink nuclear doctrines in a shifting geopolitical landscape in the long term. Until then, Europe and the United States should do everything in their power to bolster political cohesion across the transatlantic alliance to incentivize Russia to play a more productive and credible role in international security efforts—particularly in the nuclear domain.

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of State, “[U.S.-Russia Strategic Security Dialogue](#),” January 16, 2020.

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