Why deterrence needs dialogue and détente

Thomas Greminger
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About the author

Ambassador Thomas Greminger is the Executive Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) since 1 May 2021. Previously, he served as Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) from July 2017 until July 2020. During his diplomatic career, Ambassador Greminger served in various and numerous positions within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, in Bern and abroad. Ambassador Greminger holds a PhD in history from the University of Zurich and is Lieutenant Colonel GS. He has authored numerous publications on military history, conflict management, peacekeeping, development and human rights.

Introduction

Since at least the time of the Greeks and the Romans it has been conventional wisdom that if you want peace prepare for war. Strong defences, military capabilities and demonstrating resolve can deter an enemy that might have thoughts of attack. American presidents from George Washington to Ronald Reagan (and even Donald Trump) have promoted the security benefits of "peace through strength". Such logic will no doubt dominate security doctrines for the foreseeable future. But paradoxically, pure deterrence can be potentially destabilizing. Lack of communication with opponents can deepen distrust, create misperceptions and increase the risk of miscalculation. Therefore, at a time of high tensions in international relations, it is vital to retain some aspects of dialogue and détente if deterrence is to be credible and effective.

Two pillars of European security

In the 1960s, both the Soviet Union and NATO had a vested interest in reducing tensions. This led to a series of steps that resulted in "peaceful co-existence" between the two blocks, the establishment of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the signing of the Helsinki Final Act fifty years ago on 1 August 1975 "to broaden, deepen and make continuing and the lasting the process of détente".[1]

It should be recalled that détente was not only part of the CSCE's cooperative security approach but also a central part of NATO doctrine. The Harmel report of 1967 says explicitly that "military security and a policy of détente are not contradictory but complementary"[2]. Collective security through NATO was vital, but, as the report pointed out, "the way to peace and stability in Europe rests in particular on the use of the Alliance constructively in the interest of détente".[3]

Times have changed. Russia does not seem interested in peaceful coexistence with Ukraine, and Moscow would argue that NATO enlargement undermines the idea of détente and the idea that European security is indivisible. Russia feels threatened by "Western expansion" and argues that "the West never tried to address security with Russia, only without it or against it"[4]. Meanwhile, the West argues that Moscow cannot be trusted, that it must be stopped, and that this requires strong defences and resolve, and enduring support for Ukraine.

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[1] Helsinki Final Act, preamble. See also, Daniel C. Thomas, *The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2] NATO, *The Harmel Report*, NATO Archives, 1967.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "The View from Moscow," in *Back to Diplomacy: Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project* (Vienna: OSCE, 2015), 26.

Deterrence is now the guiding principle on both sides. Russia, the West, and countries in-between are all caught in a security dilemma.

As Robert Jervis pointed out in his article on "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma", many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others".[5] The view from Moscow in 2014 was that the West was starting a new containment policy and "Russia had to pre-empt this and had to teach its partners to respect its vital interests".[6] Afraid of Russian aggression, Ukraine and Georgia have sought stronger security guarantees, including NATO membership. They point to the article of the 1999 Istanbul document in which OSCE heads of state or government reaffirmed "the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve".[7] Moscow and its allies are quick to point to another sentence later in that same paragraph that says that states "will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States." Furthermore, it is often recalled by all sides that "no State, group of States or organization can have any pre-eminent responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the OSCE area or can consider any part of the OSCE area as its sphere of influence."[8]

Failure to resolve this security dilemma has resulted in war. Deterrence risks prolonging this situation, if not making it worse.

The dangers of pure deterrence

"Peace through strength" as well as deterrence require credible capabilities. Therefore, countries need to strengthen their armies and weapons systems. However, this can increase the feeling of instability among one's enemies resulting in what John Herz described as the "security dilemma". Instead of instilling fear or doubt of the consequences of something – which is the aim of deterrence – the very act of trying to deter the other side may cause the latter to take aggressive action because it fears or perceives that waiting or not doing anything is a greater risk.

Another danger is that one side will seek to deter its enemy by escalating the situation. The assumption is that the other side will back down. Such brinkmanship can lead to a counter-strike from the other side. As a result, a policy based on the logic of "escalation for de-escalation" can have the opposite effect, namely more dangerous escalation. In short, failed deterrence can increase rather than reduce the risks of conflict.

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[5] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978), 170.

[6] "The View from Moscow," in *Back to Diplomacy*, 26.

[7] Istanbul Document 1999 (Istanbul: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1999).

[8] Ibid.

Furthermore, due to poor communication, a defensive act by one side may be perceived as an act of aggression by the other. As a result, overcoming the "security dilemma" can lead to what Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler describe as a "security paradox" namely "a situation in which two or more actors, seeking only to improve their own security, provoke through their words or actions an increase in mutual tensions, resulting in less security all round".[9]

In such a tense environment, a reaction to what is perceived as an aggressive unilateral act may provoke a tit-for-tat counter-response. On the other hand, making a unilateral conciliatory move or appearing to be weak can be exploited by the other side. Either way, as seen in both the Middle East and in tensions between Russia and the West, there is a risk of triggering a spiral of mutual hostility, brinkmanship and an arms race that can lead to dangerous and unforeseen consequences[10]. The risk is even higher where nuclear weapons are involved.

If showing strength is necessary to deter aggression but deterrence can increase tensions because of the "security paradox" how can states defend their national interests in ways that do not increase the chances of war?

Dialogue, diplomacy and détente

While security doctrines in the near future will no doubt be based on deterrence, the risk of further escalation could be reduced through dialogue and effective diplomacy. In recent years, there has been a tendency towards more public diplomacy and less quiet diplomacy; more tweet than discreet. As a result, forums intended for diplomatic dialogue have been turned into theatres for public point-scoring.

There is also a tendency to cut off informal diplomatic or mil-to-mil dialogue. This is dangerous as it reduces possibilities of gathering information, communicating positions, and creating a degree of predictability. Indeed, the more acute tensions become the greater the need for safety valves and emergency breaks to stop escalation.

There have been a worrying number of incidents in recent years that could have triggered a dangerous spiral of escalation. Recall when a missile struck a village in Poland in November 2022; the incident was initially interpreted as an attack on a NATO member (it later emerged that the missile was launched from a Polish air defence system). In September 2022 a Russian fighter jet nearly shot down a British surveillance plane over the Black Sea.[11] In May 2024 a Ukrainian drone badly damaged an early warning radar site in Krasnodar Krai

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[9] Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 9.

[10] Walter A. Kemp, *Security through Cooperation: To the Same End* (London: Routledge, 2021), 37.

[11] "Rogue Russian Pilot Tried to Shoot Down RAF Aircraft in 2022," *BBC News*, September 14, 2023.

that is an important part of Russia's nuclear ballistic missile early warning system.[12] Fortunately, these will remain "what ifs?" in the history books, but preventing and dealing with such incidents, especially if they involve NATO member states, is vital in order to stop rapid escalation.

That is why, in the past, hotlines have been installed and envoys have been dispatched. The very art of diplomacy has developed over centuries to enable states to talk to their enemies not just their friends. However, we now face a situation where countries are interconnected like never before but great powers are cutting themselves off from each other. What can be done?

Breaking the escalation cycle

If diplomatic or mil-to-mil channels are blocked, an alternative is Track 2 or Track 1.5 processes. Such discreet consultations can enable dialogue at a lower political cost, for example to explore at least small steps that could break the cycle of escalation, to send signals to the other side and to test ideas.

Instead of agreeing on a wide package of measures, it can be prudent and more realistic to try to get the parties to work together on issues of mutual interest. The logic of such confidence-building measures is to induce reciprocity for something that each party considers to be in its self-interest. The result is cooperation.

Such steps need to be prepared. This requires communication. If one side is surprised by the actions of the other – even if the latter is acting in good faith benignly – there is a risk that signals may be misinterpreted. Furthermore, the announcement of an initiative should include an invitation for reciprocation. Announcing a positive intention and then implementing it should build a degree of trust and predictability. It also creates the expectation that the other side will do something similar in return. Indeed, failure to reciprocate has a price; it exposes the defecting party as unreliable and untrustworthy. As a result, such confidence-building measures have been described as "costly signals". The expression has a double meaning. On the one hand, sending such signals can have a political cost for those initiating them, for example being criticized for collaborating with the enemy. But they can also be costly for the party that does not reciprocate because it harms their reputation and any potential benefit that they may have gained through cooperation, in other words there is an opportunity cost for failing to respond positively.

To move from theory to practice, consider the concrete example of Ukraine. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the two countries have been locked in a deadly tit-for-tat spiral of escalation, both along the line of contact but also as a result of attacks deep into each others' territory.

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[12] Joseph Trevithick, "Strike on Russian Strategic Early Warning Radar Site Is a Big Deal," *The War Zone*, May 24, 2024.

The Black Sea grain deal is a good example of how both sides realized a self-interest in cooperation. So too is the exchange of prisoners of war and war dead. Other tension-reducing measures could include no attacks on port infrastructure or civilian ships in the Black Sea, restraint on attacks on civilian nuclear power plants as well as other critical infrastructure and re-opening of public airports in Kyiv and Lviv with a promise of restraint by Ukraine not to attack Russian airports. Another rather basic confidence-building measure could be the appointment of special envoys and indicating a willingness to enter into dialogue.

But the war between Russia and Ukraine is only one of two simultaneous conflicts. The second is the conflict between Russia and the West. It will be very difficult to resolve one without making progress in the other. Therefore, both Russia and the West should be thinking about "costly signals" and tension-reducing measures. A basic one would be the removal of bilateral irritants between the US and Russia such as improving the treatment of diplomats on both sides. Another would be to reopen discussions on strategic stability; discussions on arms control could actually enhance deterrence – but that requires dialogue. There could be agreement on security assurances for all sides in order to reduce security dilemmas.

A number of concrete proposals were outlined in the formal response by NATO and the United States (on 26 January 2022)[13] to Russia's demands that were made in mid-December 2021. Obviously, much has changed since then. But some of the proposals could be revived, such as the need to discuss arms control, disarmament and confidence and security building measures, making full use of existing military-to-military channels of communication to promote predictability, transparency and reduce risks, holding discussions on nuclear policies, and reducing the risk of incidents and accidents at sea and in the air.

The toolbox and acquis of measures are well stocked. Discussions that took place in the 1980s during the Cold War led to a number of agreements on such issues. These agreements strengthened deterrence, but hammering them out would not have been possible without dialogue and diplomacy.

That said, dusting off the tools and commitments developed during the Cold War is insufficient. We are not in a Cold War 2.0. The situation today is more precarious than forty or fifty years ago. Unlike during the Cold War, there are almost no arms control treaties – the safety net has been largely cut away by both Russia and the United States in the past decade. There are not two antagonistic, ideologically opposed blocks facing off against each other. While there is clearly a stand-off between Russia and NATO, there are a number of other actors involved for better or for worse which complicates the geopolitical situation. Warfare has changed, largely because of technology. The use of drones, cyber attacks, and hybrid warfare enables parties to strike each other well below

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[13] *Documentos entregados por la OTAN y EE UU en respuesta al tratado que les presentó Rusia el 17 de diciembre de 2021*, *El País*, February 2022.

the threshold of mutually assured destruction. In an interconnected world, it is possible to weaponize a wide range of things including energy, information, migrants, and access to money.[14]

That said, interconnectedness works both ways. There are issues beyond European security where the United States and Russia both have a self-interest and a common interest to cooperate. This includes deconfliction in Syria, security in the Arctic, cooperation in outer space, and sharing intelligence related to terrorism. One would hope that strategic stability could be added to that list, at least avoiding the use of nuclear weapons but even that is not a given in the contemporary security context.

Alternatives to perpetual war

To conclude and summarize, diplomacy alone is not going to stop wars. Indeed, the downside of seventy years of relative peace in Europe is that many countries cashed in the peace dividend and lost the resources and appetite to invest in national defence. Diplomacy in the face of aggression can only work if it is backed up by sufficient capabilities and demonstrated resolve. But conversely, deterrence alone cannot bring lasting stability because, without dialogue and diplomacy (if not détente), countries will look over their parapets in fear and suspicion and make moves to increase their national security in a way that increases the fears and suspicions of those who they are defending themselves against. This will create a situation of never-ending instability if not war.

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[14] Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponization of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

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