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Working paper №2, 2017 (№28)

How to reduce risks of military confrontation?

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How to reduce risks of military confrontation? Certainly not by two means that often are suggested, always separately, because they are diametrically different. The first one is building or restoring trust. Trust is, of course, good and desirable. But it has its weak spots.

First, it takes a long time to build/restore trust and I don't think that we can allow ourselves under present circumstances to indulge in taking our time. Second, because trust is a domain of relations between people not between states. States are guided by national interests, geopolitics and geoeconomics. That is why, when the scandal about the US spying on the European allies broke out, the states involved quickly swept it under the carpet. They did so not because of trust, which cannot survive spying, but because of national interests.

Of course, if by trust one implies confidence-building measures, predictability and transparency, then such trust is absolutely needed.

The opposite instrument in comparison to trust and a popular one these days is containment and deterrence. If you build relations with your counterpart from the position of strength, the logic goes, then the other side will yield, make concessions and as a result the confrontation will ease. In certain cases, this approach can work, but I do not think that it can work with Russia.

So how to reduce risks? It depends on their variety. Lending from one of the titles of side-events in Munich, we can speak about black swans, grey rhinos and red herring.

Black swans – low probability events with high impact. And in our context these are unintentional or not officially authorized military incidents leading to an unpredictable spiral of confrontation between major states. One may argue that today the pattern of the World War

The igniting stage cannot repeat itself because of the factor of WMD and the experience of the past. However, if we recall the Cuban crisis, we will remember that the world almost crossed the existential line in spite of being already in possession of both WMD and the experience of not one but two world wars. It was up to concrete people to take ultimate decisions or not to take them.

In the similar pattern one may argue that the igniting stage of the World War II cannot repeat itself either. Again WMD comes to mind but also the fact that presently there is no state in Europe or their groupings, which would plot to spread its sphere of influence by military force or would possess a potential to do so by using conventional armaments.

However, once and again events in the recent past tested this assumption, first in Georgia and later in Ukraine. In both countries there were people in charge who sincerely believed that behaving as spoilers they could provoke a military confrontation between big states. Where this clash could lead to they probably did not burden their minds with. True, BBC2 movie «World War 3. In a war room» was controversial. But, if to strip its content of anti-Russian clichés, it was quite a persuasive analysis how a situation may get out of control against the will of major powers.

Turkey's decision, no matter at what level of command it was taken, leading to the so-called incident, was in fact a very close call. From Russia's point of view, it could easily be interpreted as an act of war. No wonder that Turkey's NATO allies were astonished by Ankara's actions and at NATO's headquarters in Belgium the atmosphere was very electrolyzed. After the worst fears subsided, complacency may again take the upper hand. If again, against all odds, a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia did not occur, then why not to treat such kind of incidents as tolerable if not acceptable. It seems to me that sooner or later, if to yield to this logic, it will turn out to be impossible to unscramble scrambled eggs, as one of the participants at the Munich security conference put it.

So military incidents are dangerous and should be precluded by any means. How to do it? It seems that there is a twofold solution.

First, there are dormant instruments and mechanisms of NATO-Russia Council (NRC). At the Munich Security Conference this idea, no matter how banal it is, that these mechanisms should be revived, was expressed repeatedly and by many important people.

Second, military incidents can be prevented by bilateral agreements on the rules of military engagement and safety, first of all between Russia and the US, and then between Russia and NATO. On the basis of 1972 agreement Moscow and Washington started this process in Syria last year and enhanced it in Baku in February. Hopefully, they will continue to do so. As to NATO, last summer Russia submitted its proposals to the Alliance, but so far to no avail. At this stage it is known from secretary-general that some clarification may come in March. Again the necessity to resume operation of NRC is obvious if you want to deal with this black swan.

Then, there are grey rhinos, which are clear and dominant risks. Probably the main one today is the INF Treaty, which is crumbling at the edges. Russia is accused of testing and deploying a ground-based analogue of the sea-based cruise missile Calibre. This accusation so far has

not been substantiated by facts and Russian officials deny it. Russia accuses the US of deploying in Romania and later in Poland Aegis Ashore with launchers Mk-41, which can be easily adapted to Tomahawk instead of SM-3. Besides, there is a problem with missile drones for interception missiles, because they are made from the 1 stage of Pershing-2, prohibited by INF. It would be wise and urgent for Russia and the US to tackle this issue as soon as possible by setting up a Working group on a high political/military level to discuss it far from the limelight.

And finally, red herring. It is the issue of transponders. On all sides the military see all flying objects in the sky and, if to judge by the known facts, abide by the rules worked out during the Cold War. Everybody knows that the idea of «installing» transponders on military aircrafts is the fallacy of civilian commentators. What the Russian and NATO military have been doing for some time is jointly working out the agreement on the boundaries of fly zones for military planes, the first of which may be above the Baltic sea.

Date of initial release in Russian: February 25, 2017.

This publication can be downloaded at: <http://en.instituteofeurope.ru/publications/analytics>