



spotlight

REDUCING NUCLEAR THREATS

Why Talks on Ending the War in Ukraine Should Include Agreements on Nuclear Risk Reduction

As the new U.S. administration pivots toward negotiating a ceasefire in the Ukraine war, the growing nuclear threat from Russia demands urgent attention. Drawing on Cold War history and negotiation research, this analysis highlights how arms control – formal or informal – can help curb nuclear risks even in the most volatile crises. German and transatlantic policy makers should therefore integrate practical arms control and risk reduction measures into ceasefire discussions to safeguard European security and prevent nuclear escalation.



U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands at a meeting in Finland, 16 July 2018. Photo: © picture alliance/AP Photo | Pablo Martinez Monsivais.

BY SASCHA HACH & MIKHAIL POLIANSKII

In the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, nuclear weapons have re-emerged as tools of both deterrence and escalation dominance.¹ The Kremlin's nuclear shielded warfare against a non-nuclear weapon state has shaken the common understanding and practice of nuclear deterrence developed during the Cold War, expanding the scope of its use to extremes.² President Vladimir Putin's nuclear brinkmanship – raising Russia's nuclear forces to "high combat alert" and deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus – has heightened the risk of their use on European soil. In line with the logic of "escalate to de-escalate," this approach relies on supposedly controlled nuclear escalation

to compel adversaries to back down.³ Although this strategy has faced internal criticism – prominent experts warn of its catastrophic potential⁴ – Russia's revised nuclear doctrine⁵ explicitly lowers the threshold for use, citing conventional attacks on Russian or allied territory as possible triggers and ambiguously defining the conditions for response. This strategic ambiguity underscores a broader tension in Russia's nuclear policy, leveraging nuclear threats for geopolitical gain while avoiding uncontrollable escalation.⁶ The West has responded with a gradualist approach, incrementally increasing military support for Ukraine without provoking direct confrontation. A key NATO strategy has been to denuclearize the conflict by avoiding nuclear counterthreats and refusing to mirror Russian rhetoric or deployments. When nuclear aggression loomed during Ukraine's battlefield victories and Russia's annexation of occupied territories in fall 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden maintained nuclear restraint while, through informal channels, threatening with a massive conventional counterstrike and direct intervention.⁷ This "flexible response" strategy – inverse to the Russian approach of threatening a nuclear response to conventional attacks – proved effective, not least because it was accompanied by international diplomatic containment efforts. The U.S. and Germany collaborated with influential states opposed to nuclear escalation,⁸ particularly China and within the G20 framework.⁹ Finally, bilateral agreements between Russia and the U.S. from the 1980s on exchanging information about major military exercises¹⁰ and ballistic missile launches¹¹ have helped prevent misinterpretation and unintended escalation, as several incidents during the war have shown.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO NEGOTIATE FUTURE NUCLEAR POLICY

For the time being, the combination of nuclear restraint, conventional deterrence, and diplomatic containment has succeeded in avoiding nuclear escalation. However, following Ukraine's deployment of U.S. and British medium-range missiles against Russian command centers and supply lines, renewed nuclear signaling and the firing of a medium-range modification of the nuclear-capable RS-26 missile (dubbed Oreshnik) at Dnipro demonstrate that the Kremlin is keeping its nuclear option open while showcasing its ability to target large parts of Europe.¹³ The continuing nuclear destabilization and increased nuclear escalation potential, including Russia's ability to launch a nuclear strike via its proxy in Belarus, underscore the importance of incorporating strategic stability, risk reduction, and nuclear arms control considerations into any potential negotiations on a ceasefire in Ukraine or peace agreement. This does not mean that negotiations can be conducted without Ukraine. To ensure a sustainable and equitable outcome, any deal must carefully integrate Kyiv's perspectives and priorities. Negotiations should therefore take place on several levels to address all dimensions of the conflict.

President-elect Donald Trump has stated his intent to end the war in Ukraine, which presents an opportunity for such discussions. However, the current plan of the designated special envoy for Ukraine, Keith Kellogg, largely omits nuclear issues, focusing instead on achieving a ceasefire based on the current territorial status quo. To bring the warring parties to the negotiating table, the Kellogg Plan, which European decision-makers regard as a blueprint for future negotiations,¹⁴ envisions leveraging U.S. military support for Ukraine, threatening withdrawal (if Kyiv does not cooperate) or expansion (if Moscow refuses).¹⁵ Furthermore, it offers economic incentives to both sides and proposes delaying Ukraine's accession to NATO in exchange for a peace agreement with security guarantees.

Adding an arms control dimension would further help to broaden the zone of possible agreement. The inclusion of the nuclear-military relationship between Russia and the U.S. and NATO in negotiations can create valuable bargain-

ing chips to achieve greater Russian concessions in favor of Ukraine, while at the same time improving the precarious (nuclear) security environment in Europe. The latter appears all the more urgent should 40,000 or more European troops be deployed to secure a potential ceasefire, as is currently being discussed. This would result in a highly militarized border in Eastern Europe, with two nuclear powers facing each other, similar to the inner-German border during the Cold War. To achieve this, an integrative approach to negotiations based on interests (as opposed to distributive "horse trading" based on positions) must be adopted.¹⁶ The aim cannot be to achieve Western strategic superiority through competitive arms control,¹⁷ disregarding Russia's negotiating experience and competence. On the contrary, the art of diplomacy required is to "expand the pie," considering the perspectives and interests of all parties in order to maximize mutual gains and create value.¹⁸

LEARNING FROM THE COLD WAR CONTEXT

To negotiate future nuclear policy and arms control, it is helpful to revisit the late Cold War era, during which numerous bilateral and informal arms control and risk-reduction agreements were concluded. The beginning of what some have praised as a golden age of nuclear arms control¹⁹ was also marked by a crisis of strategic stability in Europe. In 1977, the Soviet Union deployed nuclear-capable SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe, equipped with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) and greater accuracy than earlier systems.²⁰ The ensuing military buildup within Warsaw Pact countries posed an imminent threat to Western Europe and reduced the credibility of U.S. nuclear guarantees. In response, NATO adopted its famous Double-Track Decision on December 12, 1979, offering to the Soviet Union a mutual limitation of intermediate- and medium-range ballistic missiles amidst the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the same time, NATO warned that failure to reach such an agreement by the fall of 1983 would result in the deployment of Pershing II missile launchers, along with additional ground-launched cruise missiles. When no agreement was reached, the Pershing II missiles were stationed in West Germany amid widespread civil unrest. It took several years and a change in the Soviet leadership before the U.S. and the Soviet Union finally agreed to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in December 1987, which provided for the destruction of all ground-based medium-range missiles, ending this dangerous arms race.

The current situation bears striking similarities to that of the 1980s, despite crucial differences. Today, the West is similarly responding to an increasing Russian nuclear threat and enhanced medium-range capabilities by upgrading its own deterrent systems. To counter Russia's deployment of nuclear capable hypersonic weapons in Kaliningrad and newly developed cruise missiles and nuclear forces in Belarus, Washington and Berlin agreed at the 2024 NATO sum-

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The project "PATTERN: How Does the Past Matter? The Russian War of Aggression Against Ukraine and the Cold War" identifies lessons from the experience of the Cold War for dealing with current security policy challenges. The interdisciplinary project combines findings from contemporary history and political science and is funded by the Leibniz Association.

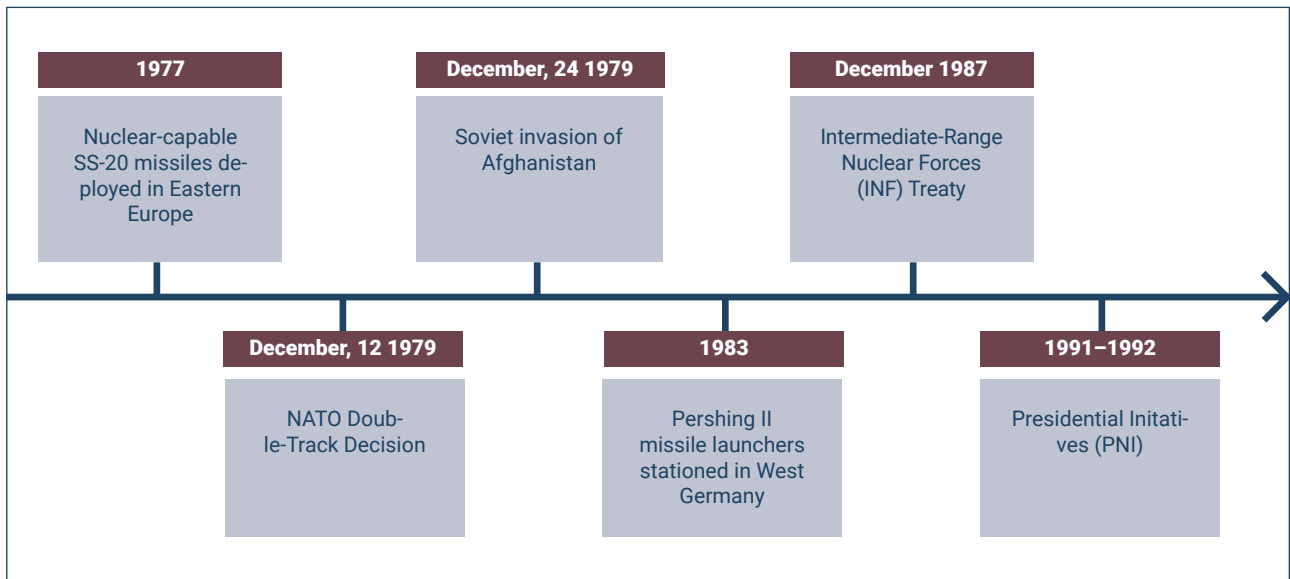


Figure 1: Arms Control and Risk Reduction in the late Cold War Era

mit to station longer-range U.S. missile systems in Germany – in particular, Tomahawk cruise missiles – starting in 2026,²¹ allowing the U.S. to target deep into Russian territory from Central Europe while bypassing missile defenses.²² Unlike the Pershing deployments of the 1980s, this response employs powerful, but purely conventional systems. Furthermore, the announcement of deployment in 2024 was the result of a bilateral agreement between Washington and Berlin, rather than a NATO-wide consensus. In contrast to its historical precedent, it was not explicitly linked to an offer of political negotiations. Nevertheless, as in the past, the early declaration of military planning leaves a window open for arms control talks. Moscow has responded with a mirror-image announcement to upgrade its capabilities from 2026 if U.S. deployments proceed.²³ The coordinated approach between Germany and the U.S., akin to the late 1970s, also suggests an implicit willingness to negotiate. In other words, the potential deployment can serve as a credible bargaining chip in negotiations with Russia.

If we look for further suitable examples of effective arms control progress in the area of tactical nuclear capabilities, the 1991–1992 Presidential Initiatives (PNI) stand out.²⁴ These were implemented in the context of a collapsing Soviet Union. Through a series of unilateral commitments by U.S. President George H.W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, and later by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the U.S. and Soviet Union substantially removed tactical nuclear weapons from European soil and dismantled critical nuclear capabilities, including strategic forces at a later stage. These actions rapidly diminished immediate nuclear risks while maintaining core deterrence, creating the foundation for future disarmament initiatives like the START treaties. Notably, these initiatives bypassed formal treaty processes, allowing for swift implementation without prolonged negotiations. In contrast to today’s situation, the PNIs were preceded by

years of negotiations on treaties like the INF and accompanied by sweeping geopolitical changes in favor of one superpower (the U.S.). Although the current geostrategic environment differs substantially, these measures serve as a reminder that arms control is possible even during times of high uncertainty. In terms of substance, it would certainly be far too ambitious to try to emulate the PNIs under the current circumstances. However, their flexible format and tit for tat approach could prove valuable in reducing immediate nuclear risks and fostering a climate of trust. Especially now, when no complex and years-long treaty negotiations are in sight, informal arms control initiatives can make an important contribution to stabilizing security environments. Furthermore, such an approach is in line with the urgency of achieving a diplomatic breakthrough in Ukraine and also reflects Trump’s preference for quickly tangible results in foreign policy during his first term as president. Even before the change in the U.S. administration, both sides displayed some readiness to explore informal agreements and strategic dialogue.²⁵ The enormous economic cost and unpredictability of nuclear arsenal modernization, driven by new technologies such as hypersonic missiles, AI, and anti-satellite systems could create further incentives.

NEGOTIATING FUTURE NUCLEAR POLICY

The resurgence of nuclear brinkmanship, combined with the collapse of formal arms control agreements, has heightened the risks of miscalculation and escalation in the Russia-West standoff. Considering the increasing nuclear threats and to “expand the pie” for the negotiations on a ceasefire in Ukraine or a peace agreement, the new U.S. administration should include nuclear policy and arms control in its deal design. Cold War history shows how conditional arms control initiatives can be and how long it takes to achieve more comprehensive agreements. But it also demonstrates that rearma-

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ment and strategic crises can create opportunities for negotiation. Justified trust can be built precisely in and through conflict.²⁶ Informal arms control and risk-reduction measures, which, as in the case of the PNIs, can be implemented without comprehensive treaties, could be a productive way to start. To ensure European security interests, German and transatlantic policymakers must approach the incoming U.S. government on this matter, emphasizing shared interests in risk reduction and security, and focusing on the following topics:

The most pressing is the proliferation and deployment of medium-range delivery systems with short reaction times, which heighten the risk of misinterpretation and unintended escalation. To achieve reductions on the Russian side, adjustments to planned or deployed U.S. capabilities in Europe could be proposed. Secondly, scaling back tactical nuclear deployments should be prioritized to reverse the recent expansion of such capabilities in Kaliningrad and end nuclear sharing in Belarus. Thirdly, while halting current nuclear modernization programs may

not be feasible, moratoriums on further nuclear rearmament and destabilizing technologies would mitigate associated risks and costs. Joint agreements to suspend tests and development of hypersonic weapons and anti-satellite systems could be a first step towards building confidence in a particularly precarious security environment. Finally, enhancing direct communication mechanisms, including military-to-military contacts with European counterparts within the NATO framework – such as at the level of the Joint Forces Commands (JFCs) – would increase transparency and help clarify intentions during crises and reduce the likelihood of inadvertent escalation. Such contacts between the U.S. and Russian supreme military command proved critical during the war in Ukraine.

Even if such a negotiating agenda may seem unattainable from today's vantage point, history reminds us that diplomatic opportunities often emerge unexpectedly and that trust is built through the management of crises. The change of administration in the U.S. could create such a historic window of opportunity.

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prif.org/spotlight-12/2024-fn
DOI 10.48809/prifspot2412

