

## DE-ESCALATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS



Crisis management protocols need to address three distinctly different situations, each requiring somewhat different set of instruments:

- Crisis prevention: Consultations and/or confidence building measures designed to reduce the risk of misinterpretation of actions of the other side;
- If a crisis takes place, crisis management: communication between parties to clarify or reverse actions that triggered the crisis and to prevent further clashes.
- De-escalation of crisis: communication designed to defuse the ongoing crisis or, as necessary, negotiations to resolve the conditions, which led to the emergence of the crisis. Such negotiations can result in the establishment of new rules and procedures, international regimes, etc.

Crisis management protocols are created for conditions of confrontation, when possibility of conflict due to misinterpretation or miscommunication appear high and when escalation could lead to dangerous consequences, such as nuclear war. The United States and the Soviet Union developed reasonably good protocols for this kind of contingencies, but even those that have survived the post-Cold War period might not work as well as they used to.

### Types of crisis management protocols

Crisis management protocols can be roughly divided into three broad categories:

- Technical support: communications systems, verification tools (including national technical means) under various international regimes or ad hoc.
- Institutions: the mechanisms for regular high-level and working-level consultations, various standing commissions, etc.
- Political conditions: domestic support for maintenance of dialogue, acceptance of the need to engage in cooperation with the adversary for crisis prevention, crisis management, or de-escalation purposes.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union succeeded in establishing a reasonably efficient system of crisis management protocols. One potentially dangerous development – deployment of Pershing II intermediate-range missiles in Europe with extremely short flight time – was addressed through the INF Treaty.

### Current status-quo of US-Russia crisis management protocols

The current status of the conflict prevention, management, and de-escalation measures can only be assessed as **barely adequate** with trends pointing in the direction of catastrophic. The system that was built during the Cold War and further improved in the 1990s is partially dismantled or technically outdated. Its evolution slowed down to a stop during the first decade of this century and during the current decade it began to break down.

The technical component of the system is no longer adequate. On the technical side, communications have always somewhat lagged behind technical progress – such communication systems need to be negotiated while progress in military and non-military means of war is likely

to overcome that slow progress. As a result, parties might have insufficient time to characterize a dangerous event or establish contact. The advent of hypersonic weapons will aggravate the challenge even further. It is advisable to return to the now-defunct agreement on the establishment of centers in Washington and Moscow to ensure uninterrupted live comprehensive communication between the militaries and civilian authorities, warnings about launches and other activities, etc.

Today, only one **such system works reasonably well – in Syria**. Two regions of potential confrontation – Baltic and Black Seas. In the Baltics, it would be advisable to begin consultations on Russian proposal to equip military aircraft with transponders: there are too many flights that are difficult to identify, too many intercepts. In the Black Sea, same challenge, but there is also the problem of contested airspace and territorial waters around Crimea.

The primary purpose of verification and confidence building regimes is **provision of data on activities** that the other side might see as a prelude to an attack or the attack itself. Unfortunately, these are not fully adequate either, as the West-2017 exercises demonstrated recently. The instruments available under the Vienna Document clearly cannot fully support that task; the Open Skies Treaty application needs to be expanded instead of curtailed. Russia, on its part, expresses concerns about an increase of US troops in Eastern Europe and especially about the prepositioning of heavy equipment close to its borders.

The institutions are almost non-existent today. Regular thematic (issue-area) consultations have stopped. The military-to-military programs have been stopped both bilateral (US-Russian) and between NATO and Russia. If a crisis, unintended confrontation, or misinterpreted actions take place, the two countries will need to spend considerable time to hold a meeting or create an ad hoc mechanism to resolve it. While US and NATO intentions in curtailing regular consultations, including military-to-military, are understandable, that decision should be classified as a mistake: today, chances of an unintended conflict and rapid escalation appear greater than ever since the early 1960s.

### **Is it possible to improve crisis management protocols**

All these issues can be resolved: it would be theoretically easy to restore communications systems and consultative mechanisms, but domestic conditions, especially in the United States, do not favor any contacts, even the most routine and technical ones. Such contacts will likely be deemed unacceptable, even bordering on treason. It is difficult to predict when even the minimally required mechanisms to prevent conflicts, manage or deescalate them could be restored, much less when they can be built to the required technical and political level.

It will probably take at least several years until the two countries can begin discussion of the reestablishment of such mechanisms. Until then, the US-Russian relations will remain fraught with the risk of a military confrontation. Even worse, both sides fear military conflict as much as they used to during the Cold War, consequently each (and, unfortunately, the United States first and foremost) are more predisposed to take risks and are less receptive to concessions that might be needed to deescalate a crisis.

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This memo is prepared as part of the activities of the [Working Group](#) on Strategic Stability and De-escalation in U.S.-Russian Relations.