



**Royal United Services Institute**  
for Defence and Security Studies



Conference Report

# UK–Russia Security Dialogue

## European Security

Malcolm Chalmers and Andrey Kortunov

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RUSI Conference Report, March 2021



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Published in 2021 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies.



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RUSI Conference Report, March 2021.

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Summary of the Discussion</b>	<b>3</b>
UK–Russia Relations	3
The Challenges Facing Arms Control in Europe	4
Perspectives on the Security of Northern Europe	6
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>9</b>
About the Authors	11



# Introduction

**T**HIS CONFERENCE REPORT outlines the main findings of the workshop on ‘European Security’ organised by RUSI and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) in February 2021 as part of the UK–Russia Security Dialogue.<sup>1</sup> The dialogue is a proven format that has provided an opportunity for RUSI and RIAC to bring together experts from the two countries to discuss key questions, including sensitive security issues, at a time when this kind of interaction is the exception rather than the rule.

UK–Russia relations have become increasingly strained over the past decade, notably from 2014 following Russia’s actions in Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, which together marked a turning point in the bilateral relationship. In the subsequent years, there have been a series of efforts by Western European leaders, including from the UK, to reset relations with Russia. Despite these efforts, relations have continued to deteriorate. Against this background, the prospect for a reset of the sort that was pursued between the US and Russia in 2009 seems, at present, dim.

Given this environment, the focus of the current dialogue workshop was on how to reduce the chances for open military confrontation between NATO and Russia, especially in Europe, and on maintaining mutual engagement in the spheres where it is absolutely crucial.

The UK’s position in Europe has undergone significant evolution in recent years, although European security remains a core focus in the ‘Global Britain’ agenda. Previously preoccupied with Brexit, the UK government has started to move beyond negotiations on the UK’s departure from the EU to fashion a revised foreign and security policy. Even though EU–UK relations might remain tense for some time, it is clear that the UK is committed to working closely with both the EU and major European powers on foreign and security policy. Equally, the transatlantic relationship will remain a core part of the UK approach to European security. As a result, UK approaches to Russia will be closely aligned with its European and North American allies.

Indeed, in contrast to the apprehension about the reliability of the US as a security partner under Donald Trump, cooperation with President Joe Biden’s administration is likely to give a new momentum to transatlantic ties. These ties are based on mutual interests and reflect largely similar approaches to Russia. Following Brexit, the UK has ensured that sanctions relating to Russia continue to operate effectively by replacing the existing EU legislation with national measures.

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1. RUSI, ‘UK–Russia Security Dialogue’, <<https://rusi.org/projects/uk-russia-security-dialogue>>, accessed 16 March 2021.

For Russia, it is of paramount importance which mode of interaction the Biden administration will opt for in relations with Moscow. President Biden might be a more difficult partner, but the Russian view is that opportunities for some positive moves by NATO should not be ruled out. The integration of military-to-military contact into the political discussions of the NATO–Russia Council could be an important initial step to help promote stability and manage relations. From a Russian perspective, such a move should not be seen by the Alliance as a step to appease Russia or as a departure from NATO’s established approach, but rather as a step that would lay the ground for more dialogue.

Moderate optimism can be expressed about the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) regarding measures to overcome its institutional crisis and Sweden’s chairmanship in 2021, which may bring new opportunities. Russia chairing the Arctic Council from 2021 to 2023 provides a further opportunity to open the space for cooperation in some areas that affect the security situation in the High North.

With UK–Russia relations likely to be difficult, it is imperative that efforts remain focused on the realistic goal of developing a ‘new normalcy’ to stabilise the situation. Moves from confrontation to cooperation are unlikely given that both sides have irreconcilable visions of the essence of the international system and cite the lack of trust as an underlying impediment to normalisation. In this situation, it is important that efforts to exchange information and views continue and that there is further work on confidence-building measures to manage confrontation to lower risks and costs.

# Summary of the Discussion

**T**HIS UK–RUSSIA DIALOGUE workshop explored the various political and security issues affecting the contemporary European security landscape and provided an opportunity to share threat perceptions and consider the potential to mitigate security risks. The participants presented their countries’ strategic priorities and perspectives on the evolving nature of European security, including the prospects for arms control. The workshop also introduced the sub-regional perspective by focusing on the security complex in the Baltic Sea, Northern Europe and the Arctic.

The discussion focused on: the challenges that the European regional security order faces; the dangers stemming from its fragmentation; the erosion of much of the post-Cold War arms control regime; and the ebbing of the credibility of the OSCE, which faced a deep institutional crisis in 2020.

## UK–Russia Relations

UK contributors noted that there have been a number of factors that have strained the UK–Russia relationship, such as the Russian annexation of Crimea and the military incursion into eastern Ukraine in 2014, Russian interference during the 2016 Brexit referendum, the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko on UK soil in 2006, the 2018 Salisbury chemical weapons attack and the attempted murder of Alexei Navalny in 2020. Some of these actions have led to the introduction of UK sanctions against Russia. Against this backdrop, the resumption of cooperative ties between the governments does not look feasible and the restoration of direct military cooperation is unlikely.

Citing this environment, the overarching idea of the discussion shared by most participants was that the status quo in relations between Russia and the UK – a ‘new normalcy’ – is not desirable but sustainable, is ‘not acceptable but bearable’. This perception about the potential for relations is likely to continue to inform the policy responses by both sides in the foreseeable future. Participants noted that the current state of affairs appears to be characterised by a situation in which both parties have reciprocal expectations that the steps towards normalisation need to come from the other side.

At the same time, participants underlined the importance of measures to reduce the chances of open confrontation. A key theme to emerge from the discussion was, thus, the need to maintain engagement in the spheres where it is most crucial.

A Russian participant expressed his concern that the decision taken by NATO in April 2014 to sever ties with Russia had grave repercussions in terms of increasing the risks of unintended military escalation. In the absence of an appropriate venue for discussions, many in the Russian

expert community would like to see the governments of Russia and NATO countries start to discuss imminent threats in order to anticipate areas of tension and to set in place the means to de-escalate confrontations.

It was recognised that, at present, communication tends to start only when the risks become unacceptable, like in Syria. With important, but narrow, mechanisms for preventing dangerous military incidents already in place, there is no incentive to conduct political talks on the factors that could lead to confrontation.

It was noted that a key role for expert discussions such as the UK–Russia dialogue should be to alert governments to the possibility that ‘acceptable risks today can become unacceptable tomorrow’. The prevention of tensions or even resolution of some areas of dispute is thus crucial to managing the current difficult relations and avoiding a further dangerous deterioration. A Russian participant noted, however, that the West seems not to be ready for a selective approach to Russia which would allow for the compartmentalisation of the bilateral agenda into independent areas.

UK participants observed that while relations with Russia are difficult, the current status quo is viewed as sustainable and there are many other issues on the international security agenda for the UK to focus on beyond relations with Russia. At the same time, it was noted that if Russia does not shift its approach in the coming years, which was deemed unlikely, the transatlantic community will increasingly focus on deterrence and risk management in their relations with Russia.

It was noted that following a series of unsuccessful outreaches to Russia by NATO members, the Allies do not feel they should be the *demandeurs* in terms of the reset with Russia or for arms control initiatives. A UK participant observed that recent efforts by Western European states to reach out to Russia, including President Emmanuel Macron’s initiative and the visit to Moscow by EU High Representative Josep Borrell, bore no fruit and did not generate a positive response from the Russian side.

Thus, for any reset to occur, it was suggested that Russia would have to take the first steps. This would need to involve addressing the issues that have strained relations between Russia and the West, notably the annexation of Crimea, military intervention in Ukraine and actions in the Middle East, as well as Russian activities in the cyber domain. At the same time, the widespread view in the UK is that the Russian government does not believe that it is currently in its interests to make substantial concessions in relation to eastern Ukraine, over the joint management of the Syrian issue or in regard to its cyber activities.

## The Challenges Facing Arms Control in Europe

The significant risks for a new arms race emerging in Europe were discussed at length. Participants were sceptical about the prospects of another golden age for arms control emerging, comparable to the one in the 1960s after the Cuban and Berlin crises, or in the late 1980s when the Soviet

Union sought a radical change in its policies towards NATO and the West. Conventional arms control in Europe – based on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), the Vienna Document and the Open Skies Treaty – is in demise and the existing regimes are no longer considered adequate to address contemporary security threats.

There was consensus that the erosion of the nuclear arms control architecture between the US and Russia poses a serious threat to European security, even if the UK and other European states are not direct participants in US–Russia treaties. Following the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the extension at the beginning of 2021 of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) between Moscow and Washington was met with relief. This positive step to renew the last remaining arms control agreement was hailed by Russian and UK participants, albeit a deal reached in an emergency rather than as a result of a wider détente.

The collapse in recent years of the last remaining confidence- and security-building measures in Europe was noted as emblematic of the rapid deterioration of Russia–West relations. The US under the Trump administration withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty in November 2020, accusing Russia of treaty violations that made continued US membership impossible. In January 2021, Moscow announced it would follow the US and withdraw from the Treaty, citing the failure of NATO signatories to agree to its demands not to share information from the Russian surveillance flights with the US.

Though the future of the agreement remains uncertain, a Russian expert welcomed the possibility of the Biden administration returning the US to the Treaty. It was opined that Russia actually launched the withdrawal procedure to send the signal to the US that renewing its participation should be considered an urgent matter.

Workshop participants indicated that it is unlikely that there will be progress towards Europe-wide conventional arms control, along the lines of the adapted CFE treaty, in the foreseeable future. Russian participants expressed support for consultations to address the risks around sensitive areas where NATO and Russia border with each other – in the Baltic and the Black Sea regions. The aim should be to, at minimum, establish the sub-regional arrangements that could prevent unintended security escalations.

It was also noted that it should be a priority to extend confidence-building measures into the Barents and Norwegian Seas, which are the overlapping areas of operations by the Russian Northern Fleet and the recently re-established US Second Fleet. Participants recognised, however, that NATO did not accept the idea of concluding separate sub-regional agreements with Russia. One of the benefits of re-establishing NATO–Russia military-to-military dialogue was identified as providing a more credible notification arrangement on ground forces and, thus, a means to improve transparency and trust.

On the arms control regime in Europe, Russian participants indicated that Moscow would welcome European initiatives on arms control mechanisms but noted that Russia assessed that

European capitals are wary of Washington's reactions to such initiatives and oversensitive to potential criticism.

At the same time, the Russian perception of Europe as lacking strategic autonomy on security issues loomed in the discussions when a Russian discussant expressed the belief that for the Russian defence establishment, talking to Europeans about arms control when the US is not at the table has no practical sense.

The fate of the Chemical Weapons Convention was discussed. A UK participant raised the issue of the large-scale use of chemical weapons in Syria, where Russia is supporting the regime of Bashar Al-Assad. The use of banned chemical agents for attempted assassinations was also noted. These actions were identified as policies that seriously erode trust in Russia's commitment to adhere to legally binding treaties.

Against the background of the chemical weapons attacks in Salisbury in 2018 and the attempted poisoning of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2020 using a prohibited nerve agent, restoring the credibility of the Chemical Weapons Convention and Russia's adherence to its provisions were seen as a cornerstone for improving relations with the West.

The deterioration of arms control arrangements was seen as reflective of the wider breakdown of the crisis management functions of the OSCE. Experts agreed that there were some improvements at the end of 2020 with agreement on the appointment of the organisation's institutional heads and with the stable hand of the Swedish chairmanship guiding this process. But the continuous tensions around these institutions, which embody the comprehensive security concept at the core of the OSCE, and the lack of significant progress around the organisation's regional conflict management activities, were raised. The limited levers available to the OSCE during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war were also highlighted.

A Russian expert opined that Moscow does not see a bigger independent role for the OSCE in crisis management and arms control, since it views the organisation as an instrument that has been privatised by the West. The Russia–NATO relationship was identified as a better-placed format to discuss arms control issues.

## Perspectives on the Security of Northern Europe

In the session devoted to discussing Northern Europe and the Arctic, the Baltic sub-region was identified as the most dangerous environment. At the same time, the Arctic can no longer be considered as a region insulated from tensions. The vision of the Arctic as a region of peace and cooperation may no longer hold true as the security mechanisms of the past are losing their relevance.

The discussion highlighted differences in perceptions between UK and Russian specialists on the military dynamics in the region. Russia sees Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea as two distinct

regions, while the UK – together with the other states of Northern Europe – increasingly see these areas as a single security space.

A Russian participant contended that assessments that Moscow is militarising the region are exaggerated; there is force modernisation, rather than the creation of new offensive capabilities. These modernisation programmes, it was argued, do not violate the military balance or provoke an arms race in the region, and are aimed to make the Russian armed forces better prepared to deal with non-traditional security threats.

A British discussant noted, however, that Russia's increased sense of security is creating a growing sense of insecurity among its neighbours. Russia has extended its capabilities in air defence and other areas beyond its borders in order to protect its strategic forces located in the north. With new capabilities, it is able to project power beyond the Arctic into the North Atlantic.

As a result of Russian activities in the region, the transatlantic community assesses that the security environment has changed substantively. NATO, including the UK, has developed a much keener interest in the region, and NATO Arctic states that were previously resistant to the Alliance having a regional role are shifting to accept that it can be an interlocutor on Arctic military questions. There is a perception that there needs to be an Alliance response to Russian activities with a growing focus on the Greenland–Iceland–UK gap.

With new actors, including China, coming into the region, Russia is on the defensive. Responding to a question about whether Russia is prepared to talk to NATO about the Arctic and managing military tensions, it was noted that Russia is opposed to seeing more NATO engagement in the region, and security dialogue should be conducted among the five littoral states directly.



# Conclusions

**T**HE WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTED the importance of maintaining a channel for candid talks between Russia and the UK's expert communities. There were a number of areas of consensus, in the sense that both sides recognised the need to maintain a dialogue without illusions in order to, at minimum, better understand each other's perspective and positions. Participants agreed that the UK and Russia should be aware of the real potential risks of any further deterioration in European security at the cost of an arms race, or even unwanted confrontation. Dialogue participants also highlighted that, despite the bilateral difficulties, there are ways that both parties can manage the risks of the 'new normal' situation. There is, thus, an urgent need to explore how this can be achieved effectively.

A realistic assessment of UK–Russia relations points to the need for both sides to recognise that the focus of bilateral ties should be on developing pragmatic and limited areas of cooperation. Discussion of a wholesale reset, which is not feasible at present, should be avoided. Some of those pragmatic areas could be talks about how to make progress on arms control, ways to strengthen military-to-military contacts, and maintaining the discussions on threat perceptions and regional security.



# About the Authors

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