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The Future of the European Security Architecture: How realistic is a revival of Arms Control?

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For two decades after the end of the Cold War, a dense net of interrelated CSBMs and arms control instruments had provided an historically unprecedented sense of cooperation, security and peace in Europe. At the time, conventional arms control was not only a center piece of the cooperative security order but its very precondition. In particular, the *INF-Treaty* (1987) had eliminated all land-based intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles; the *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe* (CFE, 1990/92) reduced and limited offensive military capabilities of the two then existing military blocs. Only when arms control had resolved the most burning security questions was it possible to agree on political arrangements such as the OSCE *Charta of Paris for a New Europe* (1990) and the later *European Security Charter* (1999). It aimed at establishing a common security area without dividing lines "from Vancouver to Vladivostok", where no state nor organization would claim a dominant responsibility for the security of all and not attempt to increase its own security at the expense of partners.

The *Two-plus-Four-Treaty* on the unification of Germany, too, contained a number of significant arms control rules. It also provided an example how to combine potentially contradicting principles, namely national self-determination and the freedom of states to choose their security arrangements on the one hand, and strategic and military restraint to assure peace and mutual security on the other. While the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its forces from Germany (later complemented by the complete Russian withdrawal from Central Europe and the Baltic States), Germany promised to remain a non-nuclear state under the NPT, not to allow any stationing of foreign forces or nuclear weapons on the territory of the former GDR and Berlin, and to observe limitations of its conventional forces in line with the CFE-Treaty. These provisions guaranteed that NATO forces did not move forward to the East and the Russian withdrawal would not become a geopolitical zero-sum game to the detriment of the Russian security.

The CFE Treaty limited the capabilities of two distinct treaty groups, namely the then 16 NATO and 6 Warsaw Treaty Organization member states, to launch large-scale offensive operations or regional surprise attacks. To that end, the treaty did not only set upper limits for their weapon holdings but also tied their forces to the geographical regions where they were stationed at the time. Intrusive information exchange, transparency, verification and reduction were designed to assure compliance. By 2001, more than 60.000 pieces of heavy armaments had been reduced in the area of CFE application in Europe

between the Atlantic and the Urals with Russia and Germany reducing most that figure. In addition, Russia destroyed another 16.000 pieces beyond the Urals. Such measures of establishing an equal balance of forces were complemented by the Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) of the OSCE *Vienna Document* and the *Treaty on Open Skies*.

When NATO in 1999, for the first time, enlarged towards East-Central Europe to include former Soviet allies, NATO sought to dispel Moscow's concerns and promised to abide by the principles of strategic restraint. In the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 it agreed to strengthen security cooperation bilaterally and under the roof of the OSCE, adapt the CFE Treaty in order to avoid regional force concentrations and not to undertake additional permanent stationing of substantial combat troops nor to move nuclear weapons from their current locations. Regrettably, however, reservations imposed by the then U.S. President George W. Bush impeded ratification of the CFE Adaptation Agreement. In consequence, the promise to adapt conventional arms control to the new strategic environment was not implemented. Further disputes on military interventions abroad and the accession of Ukraine to NATO, which were pushed by the Bush Administration, not only had the potential to split the Alliance but also alienated Russia and eventually destroyed the arms control acquis in Europe – long before Russia launched its full-scale attack on Ukraine. Today, we have lost all arms control instruments including the CFE Treaty, which used to be a center-piece of the "rules-based order" in Europe and, thus was labelled "*the corner stone of European security*" .

Whether and under which conditions a return to arms control in Europe might be desirable, necessary or feasible is a matter of sharp controversies. Currently, there is great uncertainty in Europe when and under which conditions Russia's war against Ukraine will come to an end. Even if President Trump's mediation efforts unexpectedly should bear fruit soon, many Europeans believe that a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine will not mean a return to a stable and cooperative security order in Europe in the near future. Instead, threat perceptions are likely to prevail, in particular, if a ceasefire would imply territorial losses of a sovereign neighboring country. In this view, the end of that war might herald only another stage of political and military confrontation labelled "cold peace". It would be characterized by continued suspicion, mounting threat perceptions, increased arms race between heavily armed conventional and nuclear powers and a steady danger of military escalation. Against this background, European politicians seem to have little appetite to consider a cooperative post-conflict security order in Europe. Certainly, this mood will not change as long as the Russian war against Ukraine goes on.

However, as history shows persisting confrontation and military deterrence alone will not be able to bring about a stable peace and reliable security, which is in the vital interest of Europe. A lasting confrontation based on deterrence alone and without stabilizing guardrails will always lead to worst case assumptions. Its consequence is that any military action of the opponent will be interpreted as preparation for the next aggression, which would require additional military measures in response. In turn, this will be seen as aggressive by the opponent and trigger further responses. Such mutually threatening

action will inevitably increase suspicion and distrust, lead to arms race and severe crises, which harbor the risk of escalation. Today, such danger is fueled by the many air and sea patrols and military exercises, which are taking place within a politically and militarily tense environment and in geographical vicinity to common borders or in narrow international waters and air spaces, particularly in and above Europe's marginal seas.

Such observations on the instability of relations, which are based solely on military deterrence, are not new. Following the experiences made during the 1962 Cuba crisis and repeated Berlin crises, NATO in 1967 had adopted the Harmel-Report, which suggested a double-track approach complementing deterrence by dialogue and CSBMs to hedge military risks. The fundamental condition for this to improve the situation, however, was (1) that the rationality of deterrence with its risks of escalation did work for both sides and (2) that no party intended to change the territorial and political *status quo* by force. This principle was eventually enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).

In European capitals today, however, the assessment prevails that Moscow has used military power in order to enforce own security interests and, thereby, is violating the principles, on which a cooperative security order is based: respect for existing borders and territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of states, non-intervention in internal affairs and peaceful settlement of political conflict. This has cast doubts about Moscow's future intentions and fueled suspicion that it might seek again to change the status quo by military action. In consequence, deep distrust hampers any consideration of a cooperative European security order. To the contrary, even former neutral states such as Finland and Sweden have taken precautionary measures and joined the North-Atlantic Alliance. Now, allies deem it necessary to invest heavily in defense, increase military budgets, enhance their military capabilities and station more combat forces at their Eastern flanks. To them, the military risks involved in such action seem to be acceptable in comparison to the risks emanating from a lack of vigilance.

In order to overcome this vitious circle of distrust, suspicion and acceptance of risks and potential destabilization, resorting to modest risk reduction measures only, such as the Vienna Document or the Incident at Sea (IncSea) Agreement, will not suffice. For rebuilding trust, it is rather necessary to renew a credible mutual commitment to respect the independence and territorial integrity of states. Ideally, these principles should also guide the settlement of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. At the same time, credible mutual assurances have to be given that the legitimate security interest of all partners will be respected within a future stable European security order. To that end, the principle of strategic restraint has to be restored to the agenda. Of course, suggesting a simple return to past arms control instruments would be unrealistic. But commitments enshrined in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act and the OSCE's European Security Charter could be recalled and used as guidance for defining a renewed order.

Only on this basis, traditional risk reduction measures can unfold their stabilizing effect. Such measures are not entirely new as they had been discussed intensively and

implemented successfully within the OSCE successfully for about two decades. So, one can build on a rich CSBM and arms control tool box, which has proven its value in the past. However, it would have to be adapted to a new security environment and take into account both geopolitical changes and technologically advanced weaponry. First and foremost, the principle of strategic restraint must be defined in concrete terms. The political will to avoid any military action that could be interpreted as a preparation for aggression should be demonstrated by military transparency, reciprocal limitations and verification of permanent or temporary stationing of combat and long-range strike forces. Special attention should be attached to military drills, in particular, in the vicinity of borders. To the end, adapting the Vienna Document should be considered. New weaponry that has a significant impact in modern warfare such as combat drones and long-range fires must be taken into account.

At the same time, situations that produce frequent encounters between vessels and aircraft of both sides need to be brought under control. Just relying on the proper implementation of Inc Sea Agreements is not enough since it shifts the responsibility for risk reduction to the lowest tactical level. What is urgently needed is establishing reliable 7 days/24 hours links between military headquarters that control such operations and are able to explain accidents and deescalate inadvertent incidents. To that end, official dialogue on the political and military levels must be restored.

Furthermore, states must stop any nuclear signaling, which could be understood as a subcutaneous nuclear threat. The P 5 commitment of January 2022 that *nuclear wars cannot be won and must never be fought* should be followed up by showing responsibility also as the use of language. No side should create the impression that it intends to lower the threshold for nuclear first use nor signal any intention to ruin the strategic capabilities of potential adversaries and, thereby, threaten an existential risk. In this context, the strategic impact of conventional long-range fires such as medium-range cruise missiles and ballistic missiles, including hypersonic ones, but also combat drones, should be recognized. States should explore the possibility of arrangements, which limit such capabilities and forego any stationing of such systems in geographical areas, which would create the risk of destruction of strategic assets of counterparts. Transparency and verification are necessary to build trust in compliance.

When it comes to the question who could take the initiative to revitalize arms control in Europe one should be aware of the traditional deep running differences between European capitals regarding such attempts. They came to the forefront again during the OSCE's "Structured Dialogue", which took place between 2017 and 2021 following a German initiative. In this context, Germany has encouraged establishing a Group of Like-minded States in order to promote arms control. The current war in Ukraine has muted such initiatives but I would not exclude that such formats could be revived again. As the U.S. has never stopped talking with Russia on strategic stability – at least informally –, also Europe must recognize that it will be in its vital security interest to speak with Russia and other OSCE states about a stable European security order, which might again be assured by arms control in a hopefully not too distant future. Such endeavor must be

part of any consideration on Europe's "strategic autonomy". We cannot allow an asymmetry of talks, in which the U.S. and Russia speak to each other while Europe speaks to President Trump in order to influence his mind concerning vital European security interests. The fate of the future European security order must not be decided by Washington and Moscow! The U.S. might support European efforts since a stable conventional arms control acquis diminishes the likelihood that the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons might ever be crossed.