



# DETERRENCE AND DIALOGUE: BALANCING EU-NATO-RUSSIA RELATIONS

POLICY BRIEF BY JOHANNES LITH

## INTRODUCTION

The assumption of a clash between realist and idealist worldviews is a classical building block of international relations and security studies. The greatest challenge is to find a balance between building strong trust and pursuing good relations, while at the same time avoiding idealism being overtaken by realists seizing the moment.

Ever since its adoption in 1967, The Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance, better known as the Harmel report, has been the guiding principle for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in finding this balance, first with Soviet Union and later with Russia. It combines the two worldviews through the principle of a credible military deterrence, coupled with political détente and dialogue.

After the end of the cold war, there was a significant rapprochement in the 1990s and early 2000s between Russia and the West. The warmer relations, following the formal end of the cold war, even made discussions on Russia as a future member of NATO possible and deterrence in regard to relations with Russia felt less important. However, in hindsight, almost three decades after the iron curtain fell, we can see that there is still

a big power struggle for the space between NATO members and Russia.

A discussion about the balance between deterrence and dialogue is, in other words, still needed. Relations between the European Union (EU) and Russia are also too important a topic for liberals not to take an active stance. This paper sets out to stress this importance, by presenting a liberal view on reasons for the current state of relations, ways to develop the balance between deterrence and dialogue, as well as the division of tasks between the EU and NATO. These will be summarised at the end of this paper, along with an outline of a liberal future for EU-NATO-Russia relations.

## THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY IN THE BORDER AREAS OF NATO AND RUSSIA

The events in Ukraine in early 2014 led to a major shift in relations between the West and Russia. It made many EU and NATO members go back to the drawing board regarding their relations with Russian President **Vladimir Putin**. This is not to say that finding agreement was easy before 2014. Hints of what was yet to come shone through diplomatic rhetoric, with events like the cyberattack in Estonia in 2007 and the 5-day war

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in Georgia in 2008. Nevertheless, the role that Russia played, and still plays, in Ukraine has been a cold shower for many. It also served as confirmation for many European countries that the time of conventional deterrence is far from over.

On 22 February 2018, **Ben Hodges** (recently retired as commanding general of the U.S. Army in Europe) mentioned on [Politico's EU Confidential Podcast](#) that "in all the governments of Europe, people recognize that the environment really has changed, that this is not somebody saber-rattling toward Russia or you know somebody hoping that the Cold War will come back, this is a real change in security environment." This sentiment was also echoed by several world leaders at the Munich Security Conference, the week before Politico published the interview with **Hodges**.

A ceasefire had been agreed upon by all parties involved in the Ukraine conflict as a part of the Minsk protocol in September 2014. Further measures to stop the deadly conflict were acknowledged under the name of Minsk II in February 2015. However, the crisis in Ukraine is still far from resolved and hostilities continue to take place to this date. What is more, it is not the only unresolved conflict in the EU neighbourhood countries.

Finland, Sweden, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia are all geographically located between a NATO member country and Russia. There is no active border dispute concerning Finland, Sweden or Belarus. Their strategic positioning is also fairly uncontested. Finland and Sweden have taken firm steps towards NATO membership, and are in a situation where a closer partnership without becoming a member is practically impossible (the European Liberal Forum (ELF) published in December 2017 [a publication on the current status of Finland's and Sweden's relationship with NATO](#)). Belarus, on the other hand, participates in the EU's Eastern Partnership programme and has opened up in recent years. President **Alexander Lukashenko** has even tried making moves in diplomacy, by for instance, hosting talks between Ukraine and Russia and releasing political prisoners. Despite all of

this, there is little evidence in favour of Belarus moving towards a NATO membership.

Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, on the other hand, all find themselves in unresolved and complicated border disputes. Closer cooperation between them and NATO is highly unlikely before they are resolved. Russia is well aware of this, and Russian influence in keeping all of these conflicts alive is no secret.

The area south-east of the borders of NATO members and south-west of the Russian border is active and there is no solution in sight in the near future. If there were a time when optimism prevailed in cooperation talks between NATO and Russia, that time is sadly long gone.

## THE CORRECT BALANCE BETWEEN DETERRENCE AND DIALOGUE

A balance between deterrence and dialogue can be struck in many ways. But what kind of deterrence would be most effective for Europe's security and can we still find new ways to enhance dialogue?

The above examples of direct intervention in the sovereignty of states that are geographically located between NATO members and Russia, confirm that deterrence is unavoidable. Danish Defence Minister **Claus Hjort Frederiksen** also mentioned, at the ELF-organised official side-event to the Munich Security Conference in February 2018, how the growing military presence of Russia in the Baltics and the increases in Russian hacking of information systems makes deterrence inevitable.

Minister **Hjort Frederiksen's** comment reminds us of the importance of modern-day deterrence that does not necessarily have anything to do with a conventional military presence. Deterrence can take the form of educating people and strengthening state structures to better combat cyberattacks, as another participant at the Munich Security Conference rightly pointed out. These measures do not necessarily exclude the need for conventional deterrence, but the tools already exist and can be used without harming relations.

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Better cyber deterrence can even be seen as a new way towards better dialogue, as this may open a new portal for a citizen's dialogue. Amid all this focus on deterrence it is indeed crucial not to forget the importance of dialogue, no matter how difficult, because without serious dialogue, the risk of misunderstandings and mistakes grows.

Keeping an open dialogue at civil society level is just as important as holding on to it at the level of heads of state. This is crucial in order not to further exacerbate a decline in diplomatic relations.

The importance of keeping dialogue open at both levels is often forgotten, as violations of international treaties occur at state level and the accomplishments of cooperation in civil society level are limited and might not get the visibility they would deserve. Nonetheless, we have witnessed success stories of cooperation at both levels.

The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is a good example of cooperation at the civil society level. It is a network of numerous non-governmental organisations in Russia and the EU, with the goal of strengthening cooperation between them. The core values include pluralistic democracy, rule of law, human rights and social justice.

On a state level, the Arctic Council has provided a rare opportunity for fruitful cooperation between Russia and both NATO and EU countries. The Arctic Council consists of three EU members (Denmark, Finland and Sweden), five NATO members (Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and the USA) and Russia. The EU has also seen this opportunity for cooperation during the last few years, which has led to the European External Action Service increasingly emphasising the need for a common Arctic policy for the EU as a whole. This has resulted in the EU playing an important role in developing the Arctic region and successfully communicating with Russia indirectly through the Council.

Other areas with the potential for greater cooperation include visa liberalisation and promoting a greater level

of student exchange between the EU and Russia. For this kind of cooperation to be possible, decisions need to be made on a state level, while they could greatly improve relations at the grassroots level.

The fact remains that no concrete action has been taken at EU level since the latest sanctions were handed out and there is a risk of disagreements staying frozen. Just because we do not see immediate solutions to existing problems, we cannot afford to shy away from discussions, as the ultimate risk might be fatal misunderstandings. That is why the good examples mentioned above deserve more attention than they are currently getting in order to hopefully inspire similar cooperation in other fields. Increasing cooperation in a number of fields reduces the chances of confrontation in others.

## THE EU AND NATO – WHO DOES WHAT?

So, along with conventional and modern forms of deterrence, there are also ways of increasing dialogue. However, with the growing cooperation within the defence sector of EU member states, we find ourselves in a situation where it is not entirely clear how far EU cooperation should go.

NATO's responsibilities, on the other hand, are clear. The organisation exists to prevent war in the territories of its members and a strong deterrence policy has proven an efficient tool for this purpose. Lately, a discussion on whether NATO members contribute enough in defence spending to maintain this deterrence has been raised by the president of the organisation's biggest contributor to defence spending, the USA. It is clear that, while different members have different views on exactly what is needed for this policy, NATO's responsibilities are clear to all.

While NATO's responsibilities are clear, those of the EU are not always so, at least to its citizens, and one could, see a risk of stepping on each other's toes. There is, however, in reality, no grounds for this risk. If there was one thing that was stressed during the ELF side-

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event at the Munich Security Conference and the entire Munich Security Conference as a whole, it was that EU and NATO are firm and united in their stands. Both organisations adhere to the views that recent activity by Russia needs to be taken seriously, in the form of sufficient deterrence.

Instead of focusing on the risk of moving away from each other, we should instead focus on how deeply integrated and intertwined the EU can actually get with NATO, despite several EU members not being members of NATO. In the EU, there has been a recent push for increased defence cooperation and the development of common military capabilities. At the same time, one of the EU's core strengths is its soft power. The essential questions are, therefore, how can the EU best contribute to maintaining stable relations with Russia while keeping the continent secure? And, should the EU only focus on dialogue or also on common deterrence measures?

Deeper cooperation on defence spending and manufacturing is an economically sound decision at the EU level. It is, in fact, nothing but a natural continuation of the idea of a single market. It might also be useful for EU Member States to share the burden and opportunity of providing peacekeeping missions. The coordination of this can be made more efficiently at EU level.

When it comes to actually creating an EU-level army and taking over some of the responsibilities of NATO on an EU level, things become less obvious. Not only because this touches sovereign states at their core – extending the right to act is already being undertaken by NATO members – but also because the EU is a peace project. A very successful one for that matter. The EU's core strengths are, and will hopefully stay, on the side of soft power.

Furthermore, before we can move towards a defence union, we need to agree on an EU-level foreign policy. German diplomat Ambassador **Wolfgang Ischinger** mentioned this in an ALDE organised conference in Brussels in February 2018, while suggesting the EU

Council to move towards a majority voting system in order to more easily enable the necessary changes. He also very accurately pointed out that before a credible defence union or foreign policy can be developed, we need a common policy on energy security.

The threat of the bear that has woken from its hibernation should not make us forget the core strengths of the EU. Even without tackling concerns on how exactly the cooperation with NATO would look, we must understand that if there is to be an EU army, it will also label the EU as stronger on deterrence, which might lead to diplomatic efforts being less perceived by external partners.

## FUTURE RELATIONS AND LIBERAL WAYS FORWARD

Security policy has long been seen as something many liberal parties across Europe should not talk much about. The general view is that there has not been anything to gain by going in that direction. But, given all that has been outlined in this paper about the geographical area between NATO members and Russia, it would be impossible to deny the security aspect when talking about EU-NATO-Russia relations. The topic is also too often discussed for liberals not to participate in the discussion.

What, indeed, should liberals make of the balance between deterrence and dialogue in EU-NATO-Russia relations?

On 28 February 2018, ALDE presented its new blueprint for how to move forward with EU-Russia relations. This paper suggests, as presented at the launch event by **Guy Verhofstadt** MEP, that the EU needs to move in the direction of a conditional engagement with Russia. What is meant by this, is that progress in the political and security sphere needs to be followed by opening up the economic sphere. Mr **Verhofstadt** even went as far as dreaming of a single market from Lisbon to Vladivostok. To move in that direction though, there needs to be more diplomatic and confidence-building measures from both sides. We need to find the ways

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in which we can build trust while staying strong in defending our European values.

It is easiest to start at civil society level. Unfortunately, it is also the level that is most easily forgotten by political decisionmakers. Civil society must always be the most active, no matter how close state-level relations are. Yet activity by civil society alone is not enough. We also need governments and the EU to step up with a clear strategy on how to move forward. For this, the newly published ALDE blueprint is a good start for more meaningful discussions between the EU and Russia, after years of frostier relations.

Going back to the challenge mentioned in the introduction to this paper; we need to find a balance between building strong trust and pursuing idealistic good relations, while at the same time not making the mistake of being overtaken by realists seizing the

moment. The European project that we call the EU managed to build strong trust between former deadly enemies, such that these former enemies are now actually planning a deeper defence cooperation.

Recent development in security in the EU neighbourhood countries has reminded us of the importance of deterrence. We can, unfortunately, not just ignore it and claim that deterrence belongs to the past. It is however important to keep in mind that successful deterrence looks very different now than in the past.

At least as important as updating deterrence strategies, is to keep the available platforms for dialogue open and develop new ones. In summary, the more cooperation in as many fields as possible, the smaller the chances of confrontation in others.

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