

# The role of conventional arms control in Sweden's 'near abroad'

*Ian Anthony*

## SUMMARY

The arms control system born out of negotiations between 1975 and 1991 and implemented in the 1990s has collapsed beyond repair. While NATO remains open to dialogue with Russia on mutual restraint and arms limitation, the new military realities created by Russia's aggression in Ukraine will have to be the point of departure for any new design.

- The main priority will be regional measures tailored to the situation in and around Ukraine. These regional measures might need to be supported by a wider understanding between NATO and Russia that can reduce risks to NATO without giving Russia (currently risk-tolerant) the initiative. Through its actions, Russia has tried to increase the risks to NATO from adding new members, but in so doing has also created new risks for itself. Any future understanding will have to respect the new NATO strategic and operational plans.
- Thinking about the arms control implications of current military developments has barely begun. NATO is implementing new regional and domain-specific plans and determining what capabilities are needed to defend itself not only now, but also in a medium-term perspective. Understanding how Russia might reconstitute its armed forces will establish the challenges NATO must prepare for. It is only in that context that NATO can define objectives in any future arms control dialogue.
- NATO provides an important forum in which to develop an approach to arms control across the spectrum of conventional, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The interaction between conventional and nuclear weapons in an overall deterrence relationship with Russia will be an important factor shaping any future understanding. If Russia maintains a large arsenal of nuclear weapons configured for a regional war in Europe NATO could not restrict conventional capabilities that are essential for deterrence.
- There is nothing to be gained from a futile effort to 'save' processes that have outlived their usefulness, such as the CFE Treaty and the NATO-Russia Founding Act. A chapter-by-chapter analysis of the Vienna Document could identify elements that have demonstrably failed, elements that might be revised and elements that might be retained in any future agreement.
- One issue that will shape future thinking is how to design arrangements that help Ukraine achieve and preserve its security. Ukraine is likely to remain as a future flashpoint, but there are issues arising along the point of contact with Russia from the Arctic to the Black Sea and Caucasus and also in spaces where Russia seeks to exert influence such as Moldova and the Balkans. An overall perspective is needed alongside more regional and zonal assessments.

## INTRODUCTION

After some 15 years of gradually deteriorating relations, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represented the final nail in the coffin for somewhat cooperative relations between Russia and NATO. Since then, NATO's and partners' perceptions of the threat from Russia and the possibilities of cooperation have dramatically changed. Russia is now engaged in a full-scale assault on a European neighbour, while NATO seeks to adapt its posture, plans and capabilities to a new reality.

Deterrence and defence are NATO's overarching priorities in handling the Russian threat. At the same time, the relationship still includes remnants of arms control agreements and acquis that were agreed in previous years. This memo surveys the current status of these and analyses what role – if any – they and arms control in general can play in handling Russia and other issues in future.

Military realities have always shaped arms control possibilities and at the moment the military realities in Europe will largely be driven by the war in Ukraine.

- Ukraine needs to continue to build the military capabilities needed to fight a war of survival. However, in the longer term, Ukraine also needs a military capability sufficient to deter Russia from again trying to achieve strategic ends through military aggression.
- Western countries are rebuilding the military capabilities to defend against and deter a Russia that has been identified as a clear and present danger. In parallel, they need to support Ukraine in meeting its national defence and security needs both now and in future.
- Russia will reconstitute itself as a major European military power and allocate the resources needed to rebuild military capability based on the lessons learned from the Ukrainian resistance.

The memo is structured as follows. This introduction is followed by a section on NATO's current planning for deterrence and defence and the extent to which it could and should be complemented by arms control, including lessons learned from previous processes. Thereafter, the status of current arms control agreements is surveyed and their future prospects analysed in light of

current military realities. Lastly, the memo concludes by identifying important questions and principles going forward.

## NATO: DETERRENCE, DEFENCE - AND ARMS CONTROL

Recent NATO documents assume that a confrontation with Russia will persist as long as there is conflict in Ukraine, and that mutual suspicion will last beyond that conflict. The commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all, conventional forces strong enough to defend NATO territory, and a credible link to the nuclear forces of the United States and the United Kingdom are pillars that balance the capability of Russia. To implement its *Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area*, the NATO alliance has developed strategic and operational plans that must be implemented.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, NATO remains open to a dialogue on mutual restraint and arms limitation.

The future of arms control is closely linked to whether measures to strengthen deterrence and defence can be accompanied by measures to reassure Russia about NATO intentions. In the current conditions there is little appetite for mutual restraint, and deterrence through a combination of denial and cost imposition is considered more likely to constrain Russian risk-taking than reassurance measures. Therefore the prospects for arms control based on negotiated mutual restraint are 'over-the-horizon'.

While NATO has always profiled itself as a defensive alliance, there have been different interpretations of what that means. During the Cold War, NATO policy included a promise never to use military force except in response to an armed attack on NATO itself. After 1990, Allies agreed that under certain conditions military action could play a constructive role in projecting security 'out of area', preferably but not necessarily under United Nations auspices.

NATO still demonstrated restraint when military action risked direct confrontation with Russia. In spite of the statement in the April 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO, the Alliance restricted itself to a diplomatic response following the Russo-Georgian conflict in the autumn of that year. The NATO response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine has also been cautious.

The Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine is restricted to non-lethal aid even in its expanded form

1 NATO, 'Deterrence and defence', 19 September 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_133127.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_133127.htm) (accessed 10 October 2025).

agreed at the 2023 Vilnius Summit.<sup>2</sup> The provision of lethal equipment has been a matter for individual allies coordinated outside NATO, which also goes for assistance that has a direct impact on the battlefield, such as the provision of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance information.

Russia has rejected the presence of European armed forces in Ukraine as part of any ceasefire arrangement or post-war settlement. Nonetheless, several states have underlined that Ukraine will need security guarantees backed by troop deployments. Defining future security guarantees to Ukraine has been undertaken by a group of states linked in a 'Coalition of the Willing' alongside individual decisions on bilateral security cooperation with Kyiv.

French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer have taken the lead in convening countries ready to support Ukraine in the war against Russia. At a meeting in September 2025, 26 countries reportedly agreed to participate in providing Ukraine with security guarantees, and several indicated that they are willing to deploy troops.<sup>3</sup> President Donald Trump has reportedly agreed that the United States could "backstop" these efforts.<sup>4</sup>

NATO has therefore underlined that it is not a party to the conflict in Ukraine, and will not become one in the future. Nonetheless, NATO is not interested in returning to the Cold War position of recognizing a Russian sphere of influence in which Russia can take military action with impunity against states that challenge its authority. The promise to Ukraine that it will be a member of NATO in the future has been reiterated, while NATO is trying to signal to Russia that it does not have expansionist designs, but insists on the right of states to choose their own institutional affiliation.<sup>5</sup>

NATO has tried this balancing act before, with an organic link to arms control. The adaptation of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty was negotiated when the 'first wave' of post-Cold War candidates were joining the Alliance and a 'second wave' was being prepared. This second wave included the Baltic states that were outside the CFE Treaty and

whose membership in NATO would bring the alliance to the borders of 'Russia proper' while enclosing the enclave of Kaliningrad inside NATO territory.

In the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, the signatories promised to show restraint in any permanent stationing of substantial combat forces in the area of application of the CFE Treaty in the current and foreseeable security environment. NATO restated that there was no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of Alliance nuclear posture or nuclear policy. At their Summit in Istanbul in 1999, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) leaders promised full implementation of all their arms control obligations.<sup>6</sup>

Adapting CFE was an additional effort to lower Russian resistance to enlargement. Revised territorial ceilings were intended to reassure Russia that new allies could not provide a springboard for offensive action. The new flank arrangement in the North along with bilateral arrangements between each of the Baltic States and Russia would reassure Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania that they were not facing heightened risk even if NATO limited its deployments.

The initiative failed. The agreement on adapting the CFE Treaty was never brought into force (Belarus and Ukraine are the only states that ratified it) which can be interpreted to mean that there are probably no arrangements that will reconcile Russia to further NATO enlargement while also being acceptable to the Alliance.<sup>7</sup> This applies particularly to Ukraine, where the prospect of NATO membership elicits a neuralgic reaction in Russia.

The adapted CFE framework would have introduced measures to reveal unanticipated concentrations of military capability through the inspection of 'designated areas' where military exercises and temporary deployments concentrated treaty-limited items above agreed territorial ceilings. However, inspection rights were linked to notifications to the Treaty's Joint Consultative Group. While the movement of NATO forces would have become more transparent to Russia,

2 NATO, 'Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP) for Ukraine, June 20, 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_231639.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_231639.htm) (accessed 26 September 2025).

3 John Irish, '26 nations vow to give Ukraine postwar security guarantees, Macron says', *Reuters*, 5 September 2025.

4 Alexander Smith, 'Trump says Putin and Zelenskyy are 'not ready' for peace as Europe faces pressure to step up', *NBC News*, 4 September 2025.

5 NATO, *Vilnius Summit Communiqué*, 11 July 2023.

6 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Istanbul Document*, 1999.

7 Zdzisław Lachowski, *The CFE Treaty One Year After its Suspension: A forlorn Treaty?*, SIPRI Policy Brief, January 2009.

the Russian notification and compliance record in both the CFE and Vienna Document context was poor.<sup>8</sup> Had the CFE Treaty been implemented in good faith, it would have been possible to track the build-up of Russian forces prior to the 2014 aggression and respond using treaty mechanisms. However, in the absence of good faith, even the adapted CFE Treaty would not have provided tools to address the most egregious Russian non-compliance.

The bilateral agreements between Belarus and each of its neighbours have also fallen into disuse as relations with Minsk have deteriorated. Indications from Belarus suggest that it would support the restoration of bilateral dialogue or the meetings of security advisers from Belarus, the Baltic states, Poland and the USA that were taking place prior to the 2020 election in Belarus.<sup>9</sup> This would allow for a politico-military discussion of the implications of the stronger NATO forward presence as well as the closer cooperation between Belarus and Russia. However, Western countries have instead chosen to ‘double down’ on their political support to the opposition forces in Belarus even though President Alexander Lukashenko has essentially secured his domestic political position. It seems unlikely that the political conditions for restoring sub-regional dialogue with Belarus are permissive.

### CURRENT STATUS OF ARMS CONTROL IN EUROPE AND NEAR-TERM FUTURE PROSPECTS

While the CFE Treaty remains the principal element of the European conventional arms control structure, it can no longer be seen as a ‘cornerstone’ of European security. The CFE Treaty signaled that neither NATO nor Russia would seek offensive forces capable of a surprise attack on the other. For roughly a decade, *de facto* parity in strategic nuclear forces and defensively configured regional conventional forces appeared to be a recipe for stability. However, Russia continued to build a diverse arsenal of nuclear weapons configured for a regional war in Europe. Conventional arms control was developed in the context of the 1987 Treaty on Intermediate

Range Nuclear Forces (INF Treaty) which constrained nuclear forces configured for regional war. The progressive non-compliance by Russia with its obligations under the INF Treaty before its final demise underlined that any future arms control will have to address the relationship between nuclear and conventional forces afresh.<sup>10</sup>

The United States will continue to rely on strategic deterrence to address large intercontinental-range, nuclear missile threats to the homeland. However, the 2022 Missile Defense Review (tellingly renamed from Ballistic Missile Defense Review) underlined that the US will continue to invest in developing technologies and systems to defeat missiles that are increasingly seen as the offensive weapons of choice for China and Russia (as well as North Korea). The return of Russian intermediate-range ground-launched missiles to Europe has made an increased investment in defending against ballistic, cruise and hypersonic missiles a higher collective priority for NATO.<sup>11</sup>

Through its actions, Russia tries to increase the risks to NATO from adding new members, but in so doing it has created new risks for itself. The strategic geography of Europe now means there is no space between NATO and Russia, and blunting the impact of missile attacks will include offensive action on Russian soil in any future conflict to seek out and destroy Russian capabilities before they can be used. There can be no sanctuaries for missile launch.

Russia’s large-scale offensive against Ukraine has undermined confidence in a principle of non-aggression in Europe. Russia’s formal withdrawal from the CFE Treaty in November 2023 is interpreted as a signal that the anticipated reconstitution of its armed forces to compensate for losses suffered in Ukraine will emphasize offensive forces.<sup>12</sup> At the very least, Russia has no interest in restraining offensive options.

The balance of arguments has therefore tipped against keeping the CFE Treaty in place and the shared view of NATO is that ‘a situation whereby Allied States Parties abide by the Treaty, while Russia does not, would be unsustainable’.<sup>13</sup> Individual NATO allies unilaterally

8 By dividing exercises into simultaneous smaller parallel actions and denying a connection between them Russia never conducted a mandatory Vienna Document Observation, for example. Similarly, by manipulating the reporting rules for armoured vehicles Russia never made a correct report on force levels in the southern flank zone.

9 Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the United States of America, ‘Belarus and the United States’, undated, [https://usa.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral\\_relations/usa/](https://usa.mfa.gov.by/en/bilateral_relations/usa/) (accessed 10 October 2025).

10 Ian Anthony, *Dead Man Walking: Time to put the INF Treaty to Rest?*, International Centre for Defence and Security, Tallinn, November 2018.

11 Utku Cakirozer, *NATO’s Evolving Air and Missile Defence Posture*, NATO Parliamentary Assembly Report 048 DSC 24 E rev. 1 fin, 23 November 2024.

12 NATO, *North Atlantic Council statement on the Allied response to Russia’s withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*, 7 November 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_219811.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_219811.htm).

13 NATO, *North Atlantic Council statement on the Allied response to Russia’s withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*, 7 November 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_219811.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_219811.htm).



‘suspended’ their participation in the CFE Treaty in December 2023, but without withdrawing.<sup>14</sup> NATO originally questioned the legality of Russia suspending its participation in CFE in 2007, but having done the same themselves the next step is presumably a decision around the timing of collective withdrawal and how to frame it to reduce any negative political impacts.

The arguments for remaining in the CFE Treaty appear weak even if Russia had remained as a state party. The Treaty did not prevent the consolidation of ‘grey zones’ in the Caucasus and Ukraine as places where offensive military action could occur. Even if Belarus has been ambivalent about participation in the Ukraine war, the consolidation of Russian control has led to a growing presence of offensive capabilities that are also more deeply integrated into the combined forces of a notional Union State.<sup>15</sup>

The arguments for remaining in the Treaty without Russia rest on the continued benefit of information exchange to NATO allies. Information generated through CFE and Vienna Document reporting processes may have residual value but this is not relevant to the underlying purpose of avoiding crisis and conflict. Moreover, the value of the information generated should not be exaggerated. While reporting under CFE gives Belarus access to information that it is assumed is shared with Russia there is no reciprocity as Belarus only reports on its own national status. Georgia is a NATO candidate country and NATO already has full information about developments in its armed forces while there is no reciprocal reporting on military activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Armenia and Azerbaijan have never complied fully with CFE even in ‘good times’ and there is no baseline against which to measure their compliance. Moreover, the outcome of the renewed fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan has fundamentally changed the military picture on the ground in ways not anticipated in the Treaty. CFE does not provide information about Russian forces in Armenia or the recent force deployed in Azerbaijan prior to their announced withdrawal in 2024, neither what is happening in Trans-Dniester.<sup>16</sup>

The CFE information exchange and verification helps provide transparency around military developments in Kazakhstan, but this is not sufficient to keep the entire system alive. A bilateral dialogue with Kazakhstan on politico-military matters, including current and future military plans, could build on the existing set of NATO-Kazakhstan arrangements.

### Any future agreement cannot look like CFE

Using the existing agreements as templates for the future is a trap to be avoided. Although the nature of the Ukraine war will probably promote NATO investment in larger land forces, it is hard to see how any future pan-European agreement based on de facto parity (but not complete symmetry) with Russia could ever be acceptable to Russia, unless NATO national or territorial ceilings were set at a level that the Alliance would never agree to. NATO has committed to new force levels needed for credible defence.<sup>17</sup> After many years in which national and territorial ceilings were below CFE thresholds, if Poland implements all of the planned modernization programmes, it will exceed its national limit set in the current Treaty for e.g. main battle tanks. NATO’s plans for enhanced forward defence and new regional defence plans could also be at odds with the territorial ceilings that form part of the CFE Treaty.

For slightly different reasons, neither NATO nor Russia have any interest in providing insights into important aspects of their future forces. Measures aimed to ensure that future acquisitions are predictable, with no risk that a previously undetected capability would provide meaningful strategic advantages, would have to engage with technological developments that remain confidential or secret.

The current NATO objective is to achieve an overmatch in conventional capability based in part on exploiting technologies that are now reaching maturity that can facilitate multi-domain operations. Multi-domain operations will integrate a wide range of different kinetic and non-kinetic weapons using advanced software (including machine learning) and increased computational power

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Miller, State Department Spokesperson, *United States Will Suspend the Operation of its Obligations Under The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe*, Press Statement 7 November 2023, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/united-states-will-suspend-the-operation-of-its-obligations-under-the-treaty-on-conventional-armed-forces-in-europe/>.

<sup>15</sup> Kristina Melin, ‘Studying the Neighbours of a Russia at War’, in Maria Engqvist ed. *Russian Military Capabilities at War: Reflections on Methodology and Sources Post-2022*, FOI Report R—5502—SE, April 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Hugo von Essen and Jakob Hegenskog, *Russia Announces the Total Withdrawal of Its Troops From Nagorno-Karabakh*, Stockholm Centre for East European Studies, 18 April 2024.

<sup>17</sup> NATO, Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 11 July 2023.

linked with sensors through networked communications (including satellites).<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, Russia has walked back from all transparency measures in an attempt to limit NATO insight into how forces will be rebuilt in light of lessons learned in Ukraine. For Russia, this could mean greater reliance on a mix of offensive missile forces that are diverse in type and dual-capable, with both conventional and nuclear warheads for them. Moreover, Russian operations in Ukraine suggest that a return to the use of chemical weapons on the battlefield might also be under consideration.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the use of chemical weapons could provide an instrument below the nuclear level to complicate the movement of NATO forces.

The new strategic geography of Europe is different from the mass armies facing each other across a narrow central front in Germany. Even if current plans include some strengthening of forward defence, for the most part NATO will concentrate firepower at short notice by linking dispersed weapons using a highly networked combination of sensors and shooters. A significant part of the force may be made up of platforms located far from the place where fire is eventually concentrated.

Russia experimented with relatively small and dispersed forces in the first phase of the aggression against Ukraine, recognizing that large force concentrations are vulnerable. The experiment was abandoned when it became clear that Russian command and control system is not ready to manage this kind of operation.<sup>20</sup> However, it can be assumed that Russia will learn lessons in rebuilding its military capabilities in future.

Reconstituting the defence industrial base in Europe has become a higher priority in the public mind in key states. The combined military spending of European members of NATO along with Canada is approaching \$600 billion.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the European Union is establishing mechanisms to release common funds to help member states strengthen their defence industrial and technology base. The urgency around rearmament to shorten the timeline in which NATO force goals can be met, combined with the commitment to meet

Ukrainian needs for self-defence, makes an emphasis on restraint unlikely at present.

There could be merit from a NATO perspective in limiting the concentration of Russian forces in specific zones, linked to an effective monitoring mechanism to identify zonal build-ups in a timely manner. At an opportune moment where Russia would be receptive, the feasibility of negotiating this kind of arrangement might be tested.

### Transparency measures

One characteristic of the Cold War was a high level of secrecy around military matters and in the absence of trustworthy information states tended to work with worst-case scenarios. The major military powers, but particularly the closed system of the Soviet Union, hoped to gain military advantages by developing capabilities in secret. The benefits of transparency gradually gained traction after the 1975 Helsinki Final Act encouraged greater openness. In 1986, the decision to accept on-site inspection that President Mikael Gorbachev forced onto the Soviet military establishment prior to the Stockholm Conference on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe was a step change in the pace of discussions.<sup>22</sup>

The slogan of *Glasnost* was symbolically powerful as a signal that in future, transparency could help generate trust and build confidence that no strategic surprise was being attempted. Set alongside breakthroughs in arms control verification, such as Russian agreement to on-site inspection, transparency measures were a strong indicator of political change.

The political signal sent by transparency in confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs) was politically valuable at the end of the Cold War. Arms control verification under the CFE Treaty added to the military significance of new measures. An integrated system for enhancing reciprocal military transparency and predictability and reducing risk was created in the CFE Treaty and also in the Vienna Document and Open Skies Treaty.

18 NATO Allied Command Transformation, *Multi-Domain Operations in NATO – Explained*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.act.nato.int/article/mdo-in-nato-explained/> (accessed 10 October 2025).

19 Annemiek Dols, *Testing the waters: Russia's use of banned chemicals in Ukraine*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 22 September 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/09/testing-the-waters-russias-use-of-banned-chemicals-in-ukraine/>.

20 Michal Kofman and Rob Lee, 'Not Built for Purpose: The Russian Military's Ill-Fated Force Design', *War on the Rocks*, 2 June 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/not-built-for-purpose-the-russian-militarys-ill-fated-force-design/>.

21 NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)*, 28 August 2025, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_237171.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_237171.htm) (accessed 26 September 2025).

22 Walther Stützel, '1987 – The Turning Point?', in *SIPRI Yearbook 1988: World Armaments and Disarmament*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988).

The information reported through the Vienna Document and gathered in Open Skies flights became a reference point for discussions in the OSCE and discussing the reported information was a help in enhancing military-to-military contacts. Reports provided useful metrics for validating or modifying information collected through national technical means. However, states have become progressively less satisfied with the substantive value of discussions in the Forum for Security Cooperation, and the effort to inspire more creativity in a semi-formal Structured Dialogue produced only meagre results.<sup>23</sup>

Aside from reporting, the opportunity to observe activities and exercises was also considered one of the main benefits of the Vienna Document. Observation included an explanation of the scenario for a military exercise as well as an opportunity to question aspects of the exercise after it was over. This dialogue between military professionals provided a context beyond the 'bean count' contained in reports to the OSCE. However, this benefit was most easily achieved in a period of low tension, and progressively degraded as relations deteriorated, precisely when it could be argued it was needed most. Broadly speaking, the arms control dialogue never progressed from attempts to monitor what kinds of forces are fielded in what quantities to a meaningful discussion around the intent behind force development and deployments.

The value of the Vienna Document and Open Skies Treaty has been very significantly degraded by the retreat from transparency by Russia.<sup>24</sup> Russia no longer reports information to the Annual Exchange of Military Information called for in the Vienna Document, including to countries that continue to share their national data with Russia.<sup>25</sup> Russia has tried to manipulate Vienna Document reporting requirements for military exercises to conceal the movement of forces or mislead about the intention of forces that are redeployed. Most egregiously, in 2022 Russia tried to present the concentration of forces prior to the invasion of Ukraine as a military exercise. When challenged, Russia has refused to participate in meetings to discuss its actions in line

with the set of measures in the Vienna Document for risk reduction.<sup>26</sup>

After decades in which airspace was heavily protected against intrusion, the agreement to fly freely over the territory of other states in the Open Skies Treaty symbolised an important political change. The withdrawal of Russia (and in practical terms Belarus because of dependence on Russian aircraft and technical assistance to fulfil its obligations) as well as the United States from the Open Skies Treaty has undermined the political symbolism that was its most important contribution. Prior to withdrawal, Russia had denied requests to conduct overflights or blocked them by raising spurious safety concerns. Russia used safety exceptions in the Open Skies Treaty to block, for example, flights over Moscow and adjacent territory at permitted altitudes as well as Kaliningrad.<sup>27</sup>

Of the 32 countries that are actively participating in Open Skies in 2024 (i.e. leaving aside Belarus and Kyrgyzstan that has signed but not ratified the Treaty) only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Ukraine are not members of NATO. Safety concerns make it unrealistic to fly missions over the East of Ukraine or separatist regions of Georgia. NATO allies are therefore finding it difficult to define meaningful flight paths to practice and retain knowledge and skills, but for how long states will consider this to be a sensible use of resources is an open question.

### Regional arms control

The last meaningful revision to the Vienna Document on Confidence and Security Building Measures was made in 1999. In a new chapter on regional measures, the revised document encouraged OSCE participating states to explore agreements in a bilateral or regional context to increase transparency and confidence to complement pan-European arrangements. There was a certain momentum immediately after the revision to the Vienna Document, and several states reached bilateral CSBM agreements with Belarus.

In future, Ukraine and Russia will need a bilateral arrangement defining what can (and cannot) be done

23 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 'The OSCE Structured Dialogue', undated, <https://www.osce.org/structured-dialogue> (accessed 10 October 2025).

24 Alexander Graef, 'The withdrawal of Russia from the Treaty on Open Skies', *SIPRI Yearbook 2022: World Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2022).

25 Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernández, 'How Russia's retreat from the Vienna Document information exchange undermines European security', *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 24 March 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/03/how-russias-retreat-from-the-vienna-document-information-exchange-undermines-european-security/>.

26 TASS, 'Russia will not participate in OSCE meeting at Ukraine's request on February 18', 17 February 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1405135?ref=ourbrew.ph>.

27 Amy F. Woolf, *The Open Skies Treaty: Background and Issues*, Congressional Research Service, 7 June 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nukel/IN10502.pdf>.

in the area on either side of their future border, wherever that turns out to be. That bilateral arrangement will have to take account of the de facto full integration of Russian and Belarussian forces and perhaps also Ukrainian membership in NATO, though this is contingent on the outcome of the current conflict and the future shape of NATO-Ukraine relations. However, in the past, bilateral talks between Ukraine and Russia tended to reinforce Russian advantages, and Ukraine may prefer any future arrangements to involve a wider set of participants.

Belarus has signaled that it would be interested to continue discussing bilateral CSBMs with its neighbours. The invitation extended to the US Defence Attaché to attend the Distinguished Visitor (DV) Day in Belarus associated with the Zapad-2025 military exercise, which he accepted, should probably be seen in this context.<sup>28</sup>

This was the first time since 2021 that the US participated in any activity associated with the Zapad exercise, which is the main exercise engaging Russian forces in the Western area. However, the exercise followed the established pattern of presenting Zapad as a series of discrete actions, each below the Vienna Document threshold that would require Russia to invite closer monitoring. Therefore the US had only minor insight into a limited activity in Belarus, whereas Zapad itself stretched over a wide area from the Arctic to Central Europe and involved simulated nuclear attacks in Europe's High North.<sup>29</sup>

A sub-regional arrangement that moved Belarus away from the more offensive options it has acquired recently back towards credible territorial defence would be a good outcome. However, the tendency has been in the opposite direction, as previous CSBMs have been discontinued and politico-military dialogue with Minsk has been discouraged. The recent arrangements for 'nuclear sharing' between Belarus and Russia have probably ended any prospect for any sub-regional discussion with Belarus in neighbouring capitals.

The Balkans is an area where there is a functioning regional arms control arrangement that forms part of the Dayton Peace Agreement. In the Agreement on Regional Stabilization that is part of the Dayton accords, the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (as it then was, the two successor states Serbia and Montenegro today), as well as the entities Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Republika Srpska agreed both arms control and CSBMs under OSCE verification.<sup>30</sup> The integrated system has functioned so well that Croatia stayed in the arrangements after NATO membership provided it with strong security guarantees, and the local parties have taken over responsibility for monitoring and verification from the OSCE.

With the future of Nagorno-Karabakh now effectively decided, a deal brokered by the United States may have removed any need for a separate arms control arrangement.<sup>31</sup> The future of the Zangezur Corridor, linking Azerbaijan to its Nakhichevan enclave along the southern Armenian border, was the main remaining potential conflict flashpoint. The 8 August 2025 agreement effectively ended the mediating role of the OSCE, which closed the OSCE Minsk Process at the beginning of September 2025.<sup>32</sup> The Zangezur Corridor may now be under US oversight if promised economic investment and joint economic activity materializes. The US engagement might diminish any risk of armed confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan and give the United States new insights into the main north-south trade corridor from Iran to Europe, though arrangements to implement the August agreement are not finalized.<sup>33</sup>

### Conventional/nuclear integration

The changing perception of the role of nuclear weapons in European and global security will make compartmentalized discussion of conventional and nuclear arms control unsustainable. For practical reasons, negotiations (if and when such become possible) may have

28 John Vandiver, 'Not the first instance,' Pentagon says about DOD duo's surprising presence at Belarus drill', *Stars and Stripes*, 16 September 2025.

29 Reuters, 'Russia flexes military muscle with hypersonic missiles and bombers during drills', 15 September 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-flexes-military-muscle-with-hypersonic-missiles-bombers-during-drills-2025-09-14/>.

30 Katarina Djokic, *Subregional Arms Control and Conflict Prevention in the Western Balkans*, EU Non-proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, January 2025, [https://www.nonproliferation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/EUNPDC\\_no-93.pdf](https://www.nonproliferation.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/EUNPDC_no-93.pdf).

31 The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, *Joint Declaration by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia and the President of the United States of America on the outcomes of their meeting*, 9 August 2025, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2025/08/09/Nikol-Pashinyan-visit-US-declaration/>.

32 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 'OSCE Ministerial Council decision marks new step towards sustainable peace in the South Caucasus', 1 September 2025, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/596899>.

33 Maria Abrahamyan, *A Fragile Framework for Lasting Peace Between Armenia and Azerbaijan?*, International Center for Transitional Justice, 1 October 2025.



to be separate, but Russian nuclear rhetoric and the ambitious investment in nuclear weapons by China has signalled the return of world war scenarios.

For a significant part of the Cold War, nuclear armed states created nuclear capabilities in order to make escalation more credible, and thereby reduce the risk of war. After the Cold War, nuclear-armed states took steps to push nuclear weapons further into the background and most major Western military powers (with the exception of France) went a step further, seeking to emphasise that advanced conventional weapons could perform missions previously reserved to nuclear weapons. The approach was reportedly applied by the United States when warning Russia that there would be a strong military response to the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, but not a symmetrical one.

As noted above, the strategic context in Europe is no longer a single convulsive military event in which massive forces clash in a limited area. One or a series of clashes at different points along a very long line of contact between forces that are relatively small and mobile is a more probable scenario. As Russia rethinks how to reconstruct its military capability after failing to win a local war against Ukraine, many analysts expect nuclear weapons to play a more prominent role in future Russian operations. Coercive rhetoric and very public references to the role of nuclear weapons in Russian military doctrine will only reinforce this expectation, particularly if Russia continues to invest heavily in a non-strategic nuclear arsenal comprised of diverse weapon types.

The possibility of limited Russian use of nuclear weapons puts the credibility of NATO nuclear deterrence under the spotlight once again. Although the United States goes to some length to assure European allies that the 'nuclear umbrella' remains in place, it is unreasonable to expect a US President to accept the risk of a nuclear attack on the homeland in response to what looks like a limited contingency. A large-scale conventional response by the United States to limited Russian use of nuclear weapons early in a future conflict creates additional problems for the US, given its global responsibilities. If the US uses a large percentage of its inventory of advanced conventional weapons in such a scenario, it would increase the risk that China would see an opportunity to take action against Taiwan. Should that happen the US may have no option other than using nuclear weapons to defeat a Chinese attack across the Taiwan Strait.

In future, the early use of nuclear weapons in a limited area by Russia might look like a realistic option to a risk-tolerant Russian leadership. It is not excluded that Russia will continue to build an even more diverse arsenal of nuclear delivery systems and low-yield nuclear warheads (President Putin has promised as much) while NATO 'stands pat' with its existing nuclear posture. The risk of escalation to a wider nuclear conflict may look manageable to Russia compared to the potential benefits of limited nuclear use, and public documents are clear that in Russian plans, nuclear weapons have a role to play in controlling and winning a conflict.

How to deter early Russian use of nuclear weapons will therefore be an urgent priority. Thinking on whether a new version of the INF Treaty capturing both conventional and nuclear armed intermediate-range missiles might be feasible will certainly be impacted by the discussion of effective deterrence, but other capabilities would also be part of that discussion. In general, conventional arms control could not be allowed to stand in the way of thinking about whether an effective deterrent requires putting some nuclear 'rungs' back in the escalation ladder to convince Russia that no gain from aggression could be worth the cost.

#### **LOOKING FORWARD: CONNECTING ARMS CONTROL GOALS TO MILITARY ISSUES OF CONCERN**

The traditional NATO approach to arms control remains sound and the alliance has signalled that it remains open to dialogue. A forward-looking approach to arms control can contribute to thinking about how to restore a degree of stability and achieve collective security for NATO allies. It is worth reproducing in full the language in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept:

'Arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation strongly contribute to the Alliance's objectives. Allies' efforts on arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation aim to reduce risk and enhance security, transparency, verification, and compliance. We will pursue all elements of strategic risk reduction, including promoting confidence building and predictability through dialogue, increasing understanding, and establishing effective crisis management and prevention tools. *These efforts will take the prevailing security environment and the security of all Allies into account and complement the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture.* We will make use of NATO as a platform for in-depth discussion and close consultations on arms control efforts' (emphasis added).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> NATO, *NATO Strategic Concept*, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022.

Certain conclusions can perhaps be drawn from the discussion above.

1. NATO provides an important forum in which to develop an approach to arms control across the spectrum of conventional, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.
2. There is little to be gained from using resources in a futile effort to 'save' processes that have outlived their usefulness, such as the CFE Treaty, the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Vienna Document. A chapter-by-chapter analysis of the Vienna Document could be useful to identify elements that have demonstrably failed, elements that might be revised and elements that might be retained in any future agreement.
3. Thinking about the arms control implications of current military developments has barely begun.

NATO is in the process of determining what capabilities are needed to defend itself not only now, but also in a medium-term perspective. A starting point is therefore an understanding of how Russia might reconstitute its armed forces to identify the challenges NATO must prepare for. It is only in that context that NATO can define objectives in any future arms control dialogue.

4. One of the questions will be the design of future arrangements to help Ukraine achieve and preserve its security. However, although Ukraine is likely to remain as a future flashpoint, there are issues arising along the point of contact between Russia from the Arctic to the Black Sea and Caucasus and also in spaces where Russia seeks to exert influence such as Moldova and the Balkans. An overall perspective is needed alongside more regional and zonal assessments.