

# Russia-NATO Dialogue

Co-organized by the Institute of Europe and Institute of US and Canadian Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

**Keynote by**  
**Thomas Greminger, Director, GCSP**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

Thank you for giving me the honour of addressing such a distinguished audience at this event co-organised by the Institute for US and Canadian Studies and the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The event is a very timely endeavour, given the growing polarisation between the key players in Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security, the disarray of arms control regimes, and the growing risk of military incidents. The current situation is also characterised by a low level of trust between state actors and a crisis of multilateral institutions.

Firstly, I would like to touch on the worrisome trend that the complex system of arms control agreements in both the nuclear and conventional fields is slowly but surely unravelling. The demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the non-implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and the US – and consequently Russian – pull-out from the Treaty on Open Skies are cases in point. So the system that has provided us with relative peace and stability for the last three decades is falling apart. This, together with the massive deterioration of relations between the Russian Federation and the West – the almost total break-down of trust among the key stakeholders of European security – creates risks in the short and medium term and even higher risks in the longer term.

Another challenge is the increased risk of incidents at sea, in the air or on land that bear the risk of leading to unintended escalations. Just think of an incident or accident between aircraft, a skirmish in eastern Ukraine spinning out of control or an escalation triggered by a snap military exercise close to borders. To illustrate this point, in November 2018 the escalating tensions in the Azov Sea brought me to issue a formal early warning to the 57 participating states for the only time in my entire tenure as Secretary General of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

We should not underestimate the risk of unintended escalation and that matters could spin out of control, given the polarisation, the lack of trust and the lack of channels for dialogue that we are facing.

That is why we need to talk, why we need dialogue.

This may seem self-evident, but relations between some countries or between the Russian Federation and the West are so polarised at the moment that sometimes even suggesting dialogue is taboo.

At the same time, we all know: you have to talk to your enemies, not just your friends.

That is what I tried to stress in the OSCE, for instance, while promoting dialogue through the OSCE flagship platform, the Structured Dialogue (SD). Introduced in December 2016 at the OSCE Ministerial Council in Hamburg, the SD aims at facilitating discussions on reviving arms control. It has become a vital space for exchanging information on threat perceptions, military capacity and de-escalation measures.

With the Forum for Security Cooperation largely at an impasse, I perceive the SD as a key platform for discussing political-military issues

Furthermore, given the few formal platforms for dialogue still in operation and given that even they have turned sour or sterile, we need to create more informal spaces for dialogue.

For this reason, I very much support the proposals that were made by the Cooperative Security Initiative, a Track 2 initiative that mobilised 18 highly qualified security experts from all over the OSCE area. It aimed at bringing attention back to an important concept in security policy, leading to new ideas for strengthening multilateralism and security cooperation in Europe. I am referring to the concept of *cooperative security*. In terms of this concept it is in the common interest of all states to end the current confrontation, and to stop increasing one's own security at the expense of the security of others. The final report of the Cooperative Security Initiative was produced in cooperation with FES Vienna and GLOBSEC, and was launched on a number of discussion platforms in the first half of this year. I hope this is only the beginning of this dialogue process to which I believe my organisation, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), can further contribute, perhaps together with your institutions.

Ideally, through dialogue opposing sides in whatever field could manage their relations more peacefully and cooperatively. And they could identify common interests, despite the existence of divergences that run deep. This corresponds to the concept of a positive unifying agenda that I promoted as the OSCE Secretary General, and continue to promote. It is a similar approach that was applied during the Cold War that led to the concept of peaceful co-existence. Converging interests are most likely to be found when talking about reducing military risk and transnational threats such as illicit migration, climate change, human trafficking, preventing violent extremism and addressing the repercussions of rapid technological change. Cyber security is another important area for cooperation, where the OSCE actively contributed by adopting 16 confidence-building measures, which are unfortunately still hardly known, and their core feature, the crisis communication network, is hardly used in dealing with real incidents.

Clearly, national solutions to transnational issues will be insufficient.

However, let us be frank. Multilateral organisations like the UN and OSCE are struggling – not least because of a lack of political will among their member countries to use them effectively.

I have seen this first-hand as Secretary General of the OSCE: the politicisation of administrative issues; pursuing narrow agendas at the expense of consensus; linking issues that have nothing to do with each other; and public diplomacy dominating over approaches involving quiet diplomacy and the search for common ground. The result is gridlock. The organisations that are so badly needed to deal with transnational threats and challenges are either being by-passed or ignored.

As a result, trust in them has been eroded.

My recommendation is that we should aim at designing a process to foster dialogue on European security. Such a process could focus in its first phase on simply revitalising the dialogue platform for cooperative security par excellence, the OSCE, by making sure that this organisation is once again capable of taking decisive action. This is not rocket science, but requires political will. In a second phase, this dialogue process could then tackle the fundamental issue of cooperative security: re-creating a common understanding of what the Helsinki principles mean in the 21st century.

By the way, you can find some of these ideas and reflections on my time as OSCE Secretary General in a book entitled *Multilateralism in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities for the OSCE* published by CSS/ETHZ (which is free online).

Promoting dialogue is also my vision and approach as Director of the GCSP, and very much in the spirit of International Geneva.

I regard the GCSP as a safe space where non-like-minded people can meet, share their views, and hopefully come to a better understanding.

In June this year we got a glimpse of hope when Presidents Biden and Putin decided to meet in Geneva for the US-Russia Summit. This meeting gave a new impulse for establishing dialogue on a number of issues where US and Russian interests converge, such as arms control and cyber security, and also on some regional issues like those pertaining to Iran and Afghanistan.

This clearly has the potential to make relations between the United States and the Russian Federation more predictable and diminish some of the mutual mistrust. The summit led to the relaunch of the Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD). The SSD does not aim as high as normalising bilateral relations, but rather to offer a framework that would allow participants to deal with a selected number of security issues of strategic relevance.

Washington and Moscow chose a bilateral format for their discussions in Geneva. This is not necessarily bad for multilateralism. If these bilateral conversations are well framed, they could give a political impulse to the holding of multilateral discussions on a broad number of topics that are currently stuck. Why not expect an impulse from the SSD on topics dealt with by the SD or the NATO/Russia Council, for instance incident prevention and management, transparency, or revisiting and updating the Vienna Document? If this is done quickly and effectively, this bilateral dialogue could actually strengthen multilateralism.

Another important point I want to make here is that such a process is too important to be left to diplomats and politicians alone.

Part of the secret of the success of the OSCE's predecessor, the CSCE, in the 1970s and 1980s was the active engagement of civil society.

I therefore see an important role for experts and organisations – like all of you – to generate ideas, exert political pressure to get leaders engaged, and stimulate a movement towards a more peaceful and cooperative Europe.

In conclusion, I urge you not to be spectators or analysts of European security, but activists who make a difference.

Thank you again for the invitation, and I look forward to listening to and responding to your comments and questions.