

The War in Ukraine and the Future of Non-proliferation and Arms Control in the European Continent

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ABSTRACT

The seminar to which this report refers aimed to identify the conditions and instruments necessary to re-establish a security system on the European continent capable of preventing new conflicts and deterring potential aggressors, including through agreements on the control of conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear weapons, taking into account the negotiation processes that may be developed to provide a political solution to the conflict in Ukraine or to manage its consequences. As a consequence, the main focus of the event was on the EU's non-proliferation and disarmament policies in the European context, and more specifically on the role of the EU in the context of the diplomatic efforts to establish a more stable security system in Europe and to provide security guarantees to Ukraine; concrete initiatives that the EU can take to revive arms control in Europe, in particular in the field of conventional arms and Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), in order to restore a stable strategic balance; and the prospects – if conditions are met – for a resumption of the security dialogue with Russia in the framework of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or other forums.

European defence | NATO | Russia | Ukraine | Arms control | Nuclear weapons | Conventional weapons

keywords

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Introduction

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) project on “The war in Ukraine and the security situation in Europe”, promoted with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, aims to examine the implications of the war in Ukraine on the security architecture in Europe and the policies necessary to rebuild a strategic balance through a credible deterrence posture and the establishment of new regimes or arrangements on arms control and confidence and security measures in the continent.

The project has a threefold objective: 1) to analyse, in the light of developments in the war in Ukraine, the threats and risk factors, including long-term ones, to European security and the new strategic imbalances that have emerged; 2) to identify the conditions and instruments necessary to re-establish a security system on the continent capable of preventing new conflicts and deterring potential aggressors, including through agreements on the control of conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction, in particular nuclear weapons, taking into account the negotiation processes that may be developed to provide a political solution to the conflict in Ukraine or to manage its consequences; 3) offer suggestions and proposals on the role Italy can play, in the transatlantic arena and within the EU, to achieve these objectives, in the light of its specific security interests and concerns.

The seminar to which this report refers focused on the second point listed above, specifically on the EU’s non-proliferation and disarmament strategy within the Union’s broader security strategy. The main focus of the event was on the EU’s non-proliferation and disarmament policies in the European context, and more

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specifically on the following issues:

- The role of the EU in the context of the diplomatic efforts to establish a more stable security system in Europe and to provide security guarantees to Ukraine;
- Concrete initiatives that the EU can take to revive arms control in Europe, in particular in the field of conventional arms (Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, CFE) and Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), in order to restore a stable strategic balance;
- The prospects – if conditions are met – for a resumption of the security dialogue with Russia in the framework of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or other forums.

The two thematic panels organised discussed both the nuclear and conventional dimensions of the aforementioned issues. The seminar was also a useful platform in order to discuss the impact of the latest developments in the Ukraine war on the prospects of rebuilding a stable security system on the European continent. The seminar was attended by a total of 129 participants, both online and in person.¹

The seminar was opened by **Ettore Greco**, IAI Executive Vice-President and Head of the Multilateralism and Global Governance Programme, who in his welcome remarks pointed out that some fundamental treaties and arms control agreements have become obsolete after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, for example the New START Treaty, and that even an armistice between both parties would imply new challenges in this area. As a consequence, he concluded that there will be the need for a mix of deterrence and arms control in post-War Europe.

The remainder of this report summarises the main issues and observations raised throughout the event's two thematic panels and identifies the key issues that need to be addressed in order to establish a durable security architecture on the European continent in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine.

Panel 1 – The future of nuclear arms control in Europe

This panel consisted of Clara Portela, Professor of Political Science, Faculty of Law, University of Valencia as speaker; Ambassador **Carlo Trezza** as chair; and Nikolai Sokov, Senior Fellow, Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP) and Francesca Giovannini, Executive Director, Project on Managing the Atom, Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, as discussants.

Ambassador Trezza opened the session by pointing out that the EU is not a homogenous nor cohesive actor on nuclear disarmament, noting that this became evident with the adoption and entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), making clear the division within the Union on this issue.

¹ For more details see IAI website: <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16633>.

For example, Ireland and Austria are more supportive of the abolitionist postulates promoted by the TPNW, while Sweden and Finland have become more moderate and now advocate an intermediate position towards nuclear disarmament similar to that of most European states.

Afterwards, **Clara Portela** began her intervention enumerating the consequences for European security of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The first and foremost consequence is the presence of Russian threats, including the potential use of nuclear weapons in the context of the war. Such threats were present especially in the early part of the conflict due to fears of a direct clash between NATO and Russia. However, these threats, far from undermining Western support for Ukraine, have reinforced it, thus favouring more direct military support for Ukraine, even hypothesising the possibility of assisting Ukraine in the development of a nuclear weapon.

The second consequence has been an oscillation in the neutral positions of some European nations. For example, countries such as Finland, Sweden, Moldova, Austria and Switzerland have rethought their policies of neutrality as a result of the war. Two of these countries (Sweden and Finland) have even applied for NATO membership.

In this sense, Portela concluded that abolitionist countries will have to redouble their efforts to justify their arguments and positions vis-à-vis the rest of the European states, which are increasingly showing a favourable position towards increased nuclear deterrence against Russia, the two main drivers of this approach being Germany and the Netherlands.

Following Portela's intervention, **Nikolai Sokov** addressed three main issues: 1) The role of nuclear weapons in today's warfare; 2) The future development of arms control in Europe and the world; 3) The (potential) role of the EU in the field of arms control.

In this regard, Sokov pointed out that there is widespread opposition to the United States from the so-called BRICS countries, and especially Russia and China, in the field of arms control; and consequently, the foreseeable future is that nuclear weapons will continue to be part of the defence strategies of the great powers.

He then pointed out that Russia's attempt to use the nuclear threat as an instrument to prevent Western support for Ukraine failed, as NATO countries know that the use of nuclear weapons in the context of this war is highly unlikely. Russia would only resort to the use of nuclear weapons in the event of a large-scale defeat, and even then, it would be more likely to accept a surrender or a forced regime change from within. Thus, Sokov noted that in order to get as close an estimate as possible of Russia's intentions with respect to its nuclear arsenal, we must define what kind of scenario Russia might consider a defeat. He also pointed out that very few are now talking about nuclear disarmament and therefore abolitionist perspectives will be limited in scope in the coming years.

With respect to the EU, Sokov noted that the EU has very quickly assumed its identity as a defence actor, and in this sense has become the main pillar of NATO's support for Ukraine. However, Sokov believes that there is a risk that the EU will try to converge its defence activities with those of NATO and, in this sense, that the EU will become a subordinate of the Atlantic Alliance.

Finally, **Francesca Giovannini's** intervention took place. For her, it is important to distinguish between things that were ongoing before the war and things that have accelerated as a result of the war; for example, the progressive aggressiveness of nuclear doctrines was a process that had been going on since the mid-2010s.

She then pointed out that the use of nuclear weapons as an instrument of foreign policy has been a failure, and in this sense the lessons are very different for each side, for example for the West, nuclear threats are an attempt at blackmail that can hardly materialise on the ground, and therefore shows the limits of nuclear deterrence as an instrument of conflict prevention and management.

She then pointed out that Sweden and Finland's application for NATO membership symbolises the loss of credibility in nuclear disarmament because two traditionally neutral and pro-disarmament countries will be covered by the Atlantic Alliance's nuclear umbrella. At the same time, she noted, like Sokov, that there is a risk of the EU becoming a subordinate working group of NATO, even as countries within the Alliance such as Hungary, Italy and Turkey increasingly question support for Ukraine.

She concluded her intervention pointing out that there is a need to start talking about arms control transformation because treaty-based nuclear deterrence may have come to an end. In this regard, she indicated that arms control needs to be addressed through unilateral instruments, strategic dialogues, and new presidential initiatives. It is up to analysts to give the Russians a new vision on arms control and to think of a new generation for arms control in order to move towards an "*arms control behaviour*".

Panel 2 – The future of conventional arms control in Europe

This panel consisted of Hans-Joachim Schmidt, Associate Fellow, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) as speaker; **Manuel Herrera**, Researcher, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) as chair; and Nils Duquet, Director of the Flemish Peace Institute and Polina Sinovets, Head, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Odessa I.I. Mechnikov National University and Director, Odessa Center for Nonproliferation (OdCNP), as discussants.

Hans-Joachim Schmidt began his intervention by outlining three possible future scenarios for the war in Ukraine: 1) Ukraine wins the war with Western support; 2) Russia wins the war; 3) A ceasefire is achieved and Russia controls part of the Ukrainian territories.

Regarding option 1, Schmidt considered that there is no consensus on how far a Ukrainian victory should go; for example, to a reconquest of Crimea? This view could lead to an indefinite war against Russia, which could continue to attack Ukrainian targets more aggressively.

Regarding option 2, he considered that a situation could arise in which US and Western support for Ukraine diminishes, and Russia would end up winning the war. This scenario could lead to Georgia, Moldova, and the Baltic States feeling more insecure, and would demonstrate to the world the effectiveness of the nuclear threat posed by Russia.

Regarding option 3, he considered this scenario the most likely, but not the most preferable as it would require reaching some kind of compromise with Russia. At the same time, this scenario could be seen more as a defeat for Russia than for Ukraine, which could have consequences for Putin's regime and Russia's stability as a country.

Following Schmidt's intervention, **Nils Duquet** began to examine the three scenarios outlined above, starting with option 2, which he said was more likely at the beginning of the war, but not now, as too much is at stake for the West and a total Russian victory would not be acceptable. With regard to a total victory by Ukraine, Duquet also considers that it is neither likely nor acceptable because it could create further risks as a result of a possible collapse of the Russian political system. Like Schmidt, Duquet considered that a political compromise resulting in a Cold War scenario between Russia and NATO is most likely.

He then turned to the issue of arms deliveries to Ukraine. The West is not divided on this issue, but they are discussing the possible extent of these deliveries and what specific weapons to deliver. The only way to contribute to peace now, he said, is to improve Ukraine's negotiating position, and for this to happen, continued arms deliveries to the Ukrainians is imperative. However, he also noted that arms control is crucial to maintaining peace after the end of the conflict, and that there is a risk of diversion of delivered arms, the main danger being small arms and light weapons. Duquet gave as an example the former Yugoslavia where the problems created in that situation by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons are still being dealt with. In other words, there is a possibility that weapons delivered to Ukraine could disappear and reappear in other parts of the world.

Finally, he noted that there is a risk to Ukraine's own security if the peace process is negotiated only between the US and Russia, noting that the involvement of other major powers, such as China, in the negotiation process is necessary.

After this, **Polina Sinovets** began her intervention by stressing that this is not a war in Ukraine, but a war against Ukraine. In this sense, she pointed out that going back to the borders of February 2022 is not enough for Ukraine, and that the borders of 1991 are at stake.

She immediately addressed the question of what does victory mean for both sides now. In this regard, she pointed out that for Ukraine it could be the seizure of Crimea or the Donbass, because if Crimea is regained this could endanger Putin's regime, and if Putin loses the Donbass, he automatically loses the war. Regarding a scenario of a Russian victory, Sinovets said that it is not clear what Putin would consider a victory.

She went on to say that Russia is not prepared to use nuclear weapons because nuclear deterrence does not work against non-nuclear states. In this regard, Russia hopes that in 2024 the US presidential election will result in an isolationist Republican presidency and that Washington's support for Ukraine will change. In this case, Russia could take over other parts of Ukraine, for example Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. However, a new Russia without Putin would be very interested in dialogue and bringing the issue closer from an arms control perspective is the best way to do this.

Sinovets ended her intervention by questioning the engagement scenario put forward by Schmidt since the question is: how to get there? And what kind of engagement? In this sense, Sinovets was not very optimistic because the prospect of arms control in the region cannot be foreseen.

Closing remarks

The closing remarks were delivered by Ambassador **Alessandro Azzoni**, Deputy Director General/Principal Director for Security, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

He began his intervention by stressing the fact that the return of war in Europe represents a profound transformation of the continent's security architecture. For instance, on the NATO side, the trans-Atlantic alliance has been more politically united than ever, something that the Russian leadership did not expect. On the EU side, Brussels has undertaken three main measures: 1) military support; 2) financial assistance; 3) restrictive measures and sanctions.

On this last point, he stated that sanctions are a good thing, but they have to be seen for what they are: a tool to achieve something, not an achievement in itself, as sanctions have a cost also for the ones who implement them.

He then proceeded by pointing out that Europeans are at a unique stage in their history, and that the time has come to take initiatives, through the Strategic Compass, to strengthen the EU as a global security provider. We are heading in the right direction.

Regarding the future of OSCE he said that the problem is that the organisation works by consensus, which means that it is now blocked because of Russia, but

there is also resistance from western partners because of the extensive use of extra-budgetary projects, such as the Support Programme for Ukraine.

Finally, he stated that arms control and disarmament is a political process that reflects the current state of mutual relations. When Putin suspended the New START, no one was surprised as in November 2022 the Russians did not attend the Cairo meeting to discuss the verification complaint put forward by the United States. So, relations between Moscow-Washington on the New START had already been suspended in April 2022. Russia, unlike in the Cold War, does not want to separate arms control from the current geopolitical situation. Without any change, there will be no nuclear limitation for the first time since 1972. Hopefully Russia will reverse its decision.

As a conclusion, he pointed out three main issues. First, NATO will be stronger and more united than ever. Neutrality is not possible anymore and this is evidenced by the fact that Finland and Sweden are joining NATO and the security discussions with Switzerland. At the global level, even the margin for abstention at UN General Assembly is going to be narrower and narrower.

Second, the OSCE is in coma, but it could provide, in a changed environment, a good platform for a fresh re-start with Russia. Still the foundation for potential new Helsinki Accords is not in the foreseeable future. However, even if it seems impossible, efforts still need to be undertaken within the framework of OSCE. The challenge is to preserve the existing architecture, however dilapidated it may be as we cannot create anything new at the moment.

Third, the invasion of Ukraine is a decisive event. It marked a permanent redefinition of our relations with Russia. But the Russian Federation will remain a variable in the equation that determines the functioning of our continent.

Programme

Rome, 10 March 2023

Welcome remarks

Ettore Greco, Executive Vice-President, Istituto Affari Internazionali

Session I: Nuclear Arms Control in Europe

Chair **Carlo Trezza**, Ambassador, Scientific Adviser, Istituto Affari Internazionali

Speaker **Clara Portela**, Professor of Political Science, Law School, University of Valencia

Discussants **Nikolai Sokov**, Senior Fellow, Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP)

Francesca Giovannini, Executive Director, Project on Managing the Atom, Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs

Session II: Conventional Arms Control in Europe

Chair **Manuel Herrera**, Researcher, Istituto Affari Internazionali

Speaker **Hans-Joachim Schmidt**, Associate Fellow, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)

Discussants **Nils Duquet**, Director, Flemish Peace Institute

Polina Sinovets, Head, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Odessa I.I. Mechnikov National University and Director, Odessa Center for Nonproliferation (OdCNP)

Closing remarks

Alessandro Azzoni, Deputy Director General/Principal Director for Security, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

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Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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