



CAN BACK CHANNELS

prevent direct military conflict between

RUSSIA AND NATO?

YURY NADTOCHEY

SINCE THE INTENSIFICATION OF THE counteroffensive by the Ukrainian Armed Forces against the Russian Army and the announcement of partial mobilization in Russia, experts are increasingly discussing the relevance and sustainability of communication channels or “hotlines” between the Kremlin and its Western counterparts in Washington and Brussels.

There is no doubt that the Western alliance’s decision to hold a long-planned, but postponed, nuclear drill will fan the flames but at the same time rapidly deploying conventional weapons, especially naval and air assets, may be seen as even more escalatory, as they can be used on the battlefield or in support of Ukrainian combat operations. In areas close to the conflict zone, (i.e. the Black or Baltic seas) increasing military activity of both Russia and NATO has dramatically raised the likelihood of inadvertent clashes in the waters or above skies.

Though Russia and the Western Alliance, or more accurately Russia and the U.S., came aboard with a number of crisis management mechanisms such as long existing Cold War-style Incidents at Sea Agreements (INCSEAs) or Agreements on Preventing Dangerous Military Activities (DMAs), or relatively new U.S.-Russia MoU on Prevention of Flight

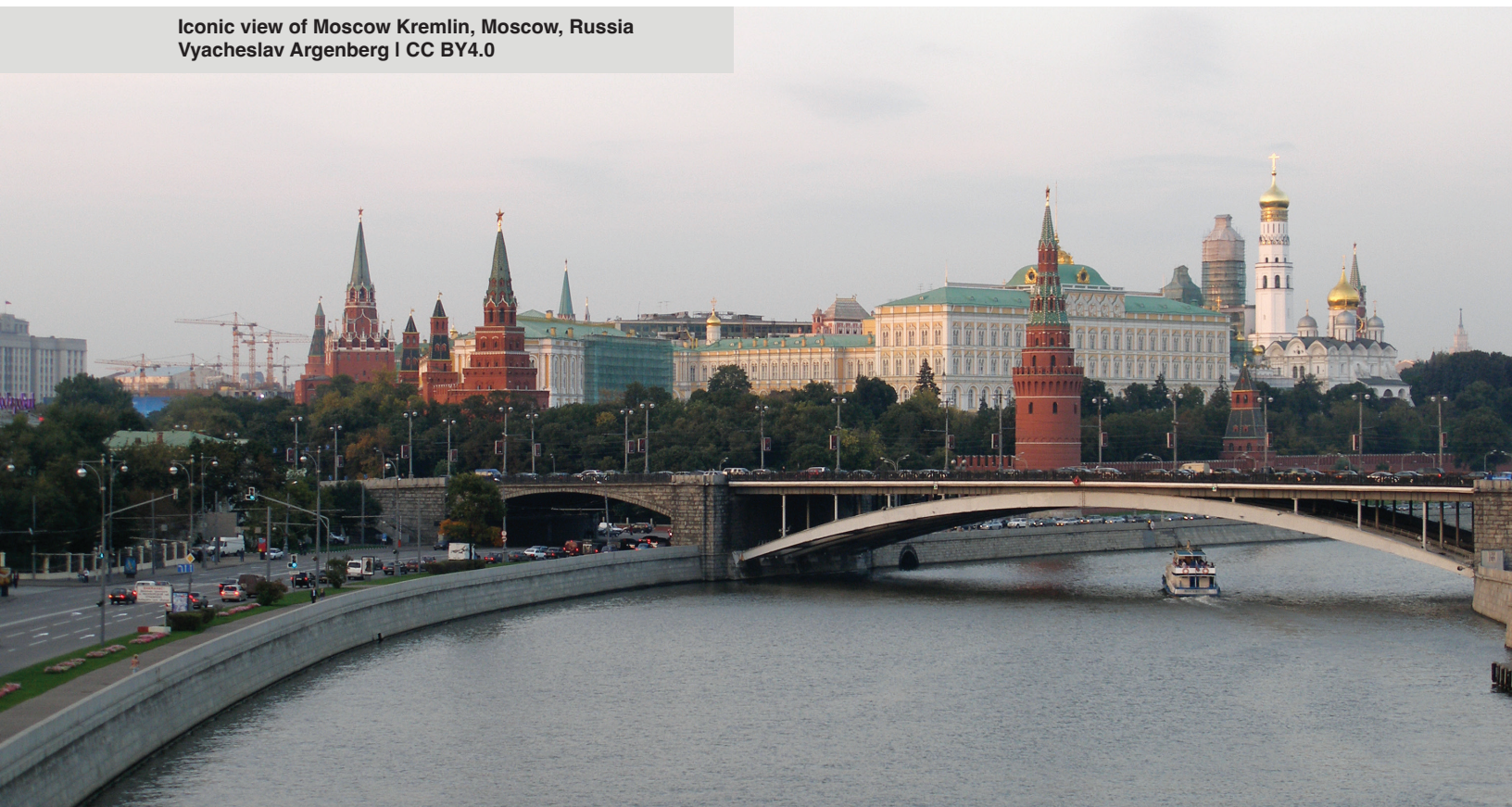
Safety Incidents in Syria (2015) there is a little hope that existing mechanisms will alleviate tensions with respect to the current circumstances.

In areas close to the conflict zone, increasing military activity of both Russia and NATO has dramatically raised the likelihood of inadvertent clashes in the waters and skies.

If things go very poorly, these channels might have been the only barrier to prevent a full-fledged war in Europe.

Against the background of ongoing war in Ukraine few options remain to escape the worst scenario of tensions between Russia and the West in Eastern Europe and beyond. We might point out three possible ways on how this disastrous future can be avoided:

Iconic view of Moscow Kremlin, Moscow, Russia
Vyacheslav Argenberg | CC BY4.0





2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine war torn city destroyed car burn out | Алексей Синельников Adobe Stock

- 1) *unilateral steps taken by the conflicting parties in order to de-escalate;*
- 2) *enhancing existing communication lines;*
- 3) *back channel diplomacy*

The first way can hardly be taken into consideration, as right now we don't see readiness either from Kyiv or Moscow to back down nor an appetite in either the Kremlin or the White House to reach an endgame in the Ukrainian chess party. Standing down would definitely be unacceptable to all the parties involved as this decision would be proof of weakness of the side who decides to disengage unilaterally. That is why all do not hesitate to raise bets in this bloody game. Either it will be a long and protracted war or a rapid conflict escalation, and it seems that all the players are standing solid in their determination to win the battle on the battlefield rather than at the negotiating table.

Nor is it likely that any kind of existing confidence-building measures either bilateral or multilateral can be used as a

model for a possible U.S.-Russia or NATO-Russia “red line” deal. It is not only due to both sides having different views on where these lines need to be drawn but also because their disputes go beyond the conflict over Ukraine and encompass a broad scope of global and regional security issues between Washington and Moscow.

Crisis or risk management tools like the 2014 U.S.-China Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) On the Rules of Behavior for the Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters cannot be taken as a model for Russia-NATO agreement. There are several arguments explaining the inapplicability of that deal to the U.S.-Russia or U.S.-NATO context. It is not only because Moscow and Washington are much closer to direct military conflict than Washington-Beijing are—the security environment in the Euro-Atlantic is much more complex and institutionalized than that of the Asia-Pacific. NATO as a security community has its own “strategic culture” and its value-based approach towards negotiating with external players sometimes creates significant obstacles to reach a Realpolitik-like agreement (such as the case of U.S.—China relations). Moreover, mutual threat perception matters as well. One cannot deny that the eastern flank of NATO (the Baltics and Poland) feel especially vulnerable. Likewise, Moscow's hysteria on Alliance military activity close to Russia's western border has little similarity to what is happening in U.S.-China relations, where large distances across the Pacific help to control tensions over South China Sea or Taiwan Strait, turning them into only sporadic and limited scale saber-rattling.

Despite a decline in the importance of hotlines at the end of the Cold War, U.S.-Russia tensions might make them crucial again. In late 1980s and early 90s these channels of communication were mostly seen as a diplomatic decoration with a more symbolic role in strengthening political ties

Right now we don't see readiness either from Kyiv or Moscow to back down nor an appetite in either the Kremlin or the White House to reach an endgame.



Russian bombardment of Kyiv TV Tower | Міністерство внутрішніх справ України | СС ВУ4.0

between yesterday's adversaries. But today, communication hotlines might be considered to be all but the last remaining tool that can fill the gap in the dramatic reduction in physical contact among Russia's diplomats, its military and their respective Western counterparts.

According to Russian ambassador Anatoly Antonov, within only the last four years the number of staff in the Russian Embassy in Washington, was reduced by more than 120 diplomats, not counting other employees.¹ The same is true for American diplomats in Moscow (as principle of reciprocity is applicable in diplomatic relations) and their counterparts from many NATO member states that are at odds with Moscow.

As for the Russian military's relations with NATO as an entity, things have also gotten worse here. In October 2021, just three months before the Russia's invasion in Ukraine, both NATO military liaison mission in Moscow, and Russia's counterpart mission in the Supreme Headquarters Allied Power in Europe (SHAPE) were closed putting the end to a long-term cultivated interpersonal tie among Russia and the alliance's military officers.²

It is unlikely, of course, that all these shortcomings and failures in maintaining dialogue can be easily overcome solely by relying on electronic communication lines.

The security environment in the Euro-Atlantic is much more complex and institutionalized than that of the Asia-Pacific.

For certain, a strong human dimension is needed to bring this dialogue to life, and it can be embraced in the form of crisis diplomacy based on effective back channels provided by highly authoritative people but with no official affiliation to governments. It is no secret that Moscow and Washington cannot refer only to their past Cold War experience in this situation. Such attempts have also taken place in the recent past according to the media.

No one can deny that both countries have laid a good foundation for cooperation among the U.S. and Russia's business circles since the Yeltsin era and even despite the sanctions imposed on Russian billionaires who have close ties to Kremlin, many of them still do business in the West and maintain contacts with decisionmakers in the United States and European Union. This avenue could potentially help to boost private communication amongst Moscow, Washington, and some key NATO members. Of course, the West must immediately make it clear to Moscow that such contacts should not be treated as an attempt to negotiate with Russia on any political aspects of the war. Moreover, it should be especially stated that neither the war nor potential



Embassy of Russia in Washington DC. Russia | Asiiir
CC BY SA 2.5 DEED

peace can be discussed whilst bypassing Kyiv or any other capitals of Europe or in Donetsk and Luhansk. One should also bear it in mind that this type of specific communication has nothing to do with normal diplomacy and the ongoing negotiating process with all parties involved in the conflict. Back channels can in no way replace official negotiations or even be seen as a precondition to them. Instead, they might be treated as a very specific tool employed to deal with uncertainties, miscalculation, or misperception. Given the fact that the war has already outgrown the bilateral framework, such private channels of communication could be at least an attempt to prevent the most destructive and the dangerous manifestations of military activity in Europe.

For sure, there is a great risk of failure of this enterprise that cannot be ignored by anyone. There is no place for high expectations here, since the parties have not yet reached that painful threshold beyond which the desire to speak will become insurmountable, being directly related to the desire to survive.



Destruction of Russian w:BMP-3 IFV by Ukrainian troops in Mariupol, per Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine | Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine CC BY 4.0 DEED



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yury Nadochey has worked as an associate professor at the Department of World Politics at MGIMO University for many years. He taught a number of courses on the theory and history of international relations, as well as on world politics and EU politics to both bachelor's and master's students. Nadochey holds a diploma in area studies (European Studies) from the School of International Relations of the Moscow University for the Humanities (2004). In 2005 he was an intern, and then a fellow of the PIR Center. He also took part in PIR Center International Summer School on Nonproliferation of WMD for experts from Russia and CIS countries. As part of his Ph.D. thesis, he completed an internship at the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies (2006). He received his Ph.D. in contemporary history from Moscow University for the Humanities (2008). His paper focused on the origin of unilateralism in the U.S. Euro-Atlantic policy after the Cold War. His area of expertise includes the security policy of NATO and EU members, transatlantic relations, security institutions in Europe, confidence-building measures, disarmament, and arms control. He has authored roughly 50 publications in a number of leading academic journals and is a regular contributor to the *European Security Bulletin*, published by INION Russian Academy of Sciences.

ENDNOTES

1. Vladislave Gordeev, "Review of The Russian Ambassador Said That the State Department Raised the Issue of His Departure from the United States," *Ros Business Consulting (RBC)*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/26/01/2022/61fa0979a794731af1be436> (accessed May 3, 2023).
2. "Lavrov Announced the Closure of the Military Communications Mission and NATO Information Bureau in Russia," *Ros Business Consulting (RBC)*, October 18, 2021, www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/616d5cfb9a7947efb3dabad7 (accessed May 3, 2023).