Belarus Can Help Europe to Stop Procrastinating on Risk-Reduction

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The first month of 2020 shows that we should prepare for a difficult and ugly year in world politics. Little can be done at the moment to resolve fully growing differences between major international actors. But a number of measures could be adopted to reduce unnecessary military risk. While experts have recommended them extensively, Europe appears to be procrastinating. What can be done to help Europeans take risk reduction steps?

European security procrastination

For various reasons, Russia and the West disagree profoundly on many European security issues. They will never agree on the causes of today's geopolitical tensions. Or accept each other's behaviour in the security realm as legitimate. They will also continue to dispute the other's security concerns. Yet despite these differences, neither wants a major armed conflict. That is why both countries agree, in principle, to the importance and necessity of measures which can lower the risks of misinterpretation and unintended military consequences.

Risk-reduction measures have proven their value in reducing threatening security circumstances. These include permanently functional hotlines, advance warning and signalling of army activities, and other types of military-to-military contacts and communication – all aimed at preventing hazardous incidents or minimising their consequence. Other measures also have elements of confidence-building between states. These include regular on-site inspections, advance notifications of military activity, observations and visits to dispel concerns about military activities, and verification procedures, among others.

These and other measures are well tested and recognised in relevant international instruments – for instance, the consecutive iterations of the Vienna Document. Experts are proposing more calibrated ones. And while pundits and decision-makers can argue about the nuances, almost all agree that risk-reduction is indispensable in managing the increasingly adversarial relationship between Russia and the West and preserving peace in Europe.

Hardly any substantial progress in implementing such measures in Europe has taken place in recent years. On the contrary, unattended military risks seem to be multiplying, as innovative technologies increase and tensions spill over into new areas, such as the cyberspace. Moreover, modern deterrence is based on light and agile forward military presence with advanced capacities for rapid reinforcement, creating additional new risks. In particular, any redeployment in the direction of the contact zone, especially amid a crisis, is likely to be perceived by the other side as an offensive move and will, thus, further aggravate the escalatory spiral.

> The situation is similar to procrastination: Keeping yourself busy with something even though you know you should deal with another more urgent and important issue.

While growing risks make everyone feel increasingly unsafe, we see all sorts of excuses for not doing the right thing. Most often, we hear about insufficient mutual trust and lack of political will for risk-reduction steps. Politicians also tend to delay unpopular decisions. As long as deterrence sells well in their countries, they avoid serious discussions about risk-reduction measures. Again, like procrastination, behavioural psychology explains that our brain tends to value immediate rewards more highly than future ones.

The worst form of procrastination is when you understand something is important, but do not have a deadline to complete it. Unfortunately, this is exactly the situation with European security. Here we can learn that we have missed a “deadline” only when it is too late.

Belarus is offering a recipe

The parallels with procrastination are not only revealing but can also be instructive. Literature suggests that one method to deal with procrastination is to break down a large and complicated task into several smaller ones. If a comprehensive agreement on risk-reduction does not look feasible at the moment, a first step would be to limit the focus to where it is most needed and welcomed.

At last year's edition of the Minsk Dialogue Forum, the President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko declared that he intended to make Belarus a "success story of European security". This means that his government believes there is a way for smaller states in-between Russia and the West not to become the inevitable victims of geopolitical confrontation. Belarus does not want to experience what previously happened to Georgia and Ukraine, and unsurprisingly this ambition is shared by Belarusian civil society.

It is telling that the Minsk Dialogue Forum became the first-ever event designed and organised by a non-government think tank (and supported by several international think tanks, including the ELN) that Belarus's president, who has never had fond relations with NGOs, attended during his many years in office.

Belarus is actively promoting de-escalation initiatives. Which recently included a call on European nations to adopt a declaration on non-deployment of intermediate-range missiles, an idea of a digital neighbourhood belt, and an initiative of a large-scale security dialogue with a view to breathing new life into the Helsinki principles.

Of course, a success story is much easier declared than made a reality. But Belarus has indeed found itself in a unique situation. It is a member of the Russian-driven Collective Security Treaty Organisation and has mutual defence commitments with Moscow. Yet, at the same time, it has developed a network of bilateral agreements on confidence-and-security-building measures with its other neighbours – Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Those are in line with Chapter X of the Vienna Document and complement the latter with additional regional measures.

> Belarus's vital interest in risk-reduction, combined with its special relationship with Russia and the existing bilateral CSBMs with Ukraine and NATO member states, create the opportunity for a promising regional solution.

Not only can it help Europe end its procrastination on risk-reduction, but it can also serve a testing ground for more ambitious security-building ideas. For example, Poland and Germany have put forward proposals on modernising the Vienna Document. Right away, these are unlikely to fly. But as a first step, they could be negotiated and tested within a specified area encompassing all of Belarus and parts of Poland, the Baltic states, Ukraine and Russia. Effectively, this would establish an area of enhanced risk-reduction and confidence-building measures on the territory most vulnerable to further escalation of geopolitical tensions in Europe.

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