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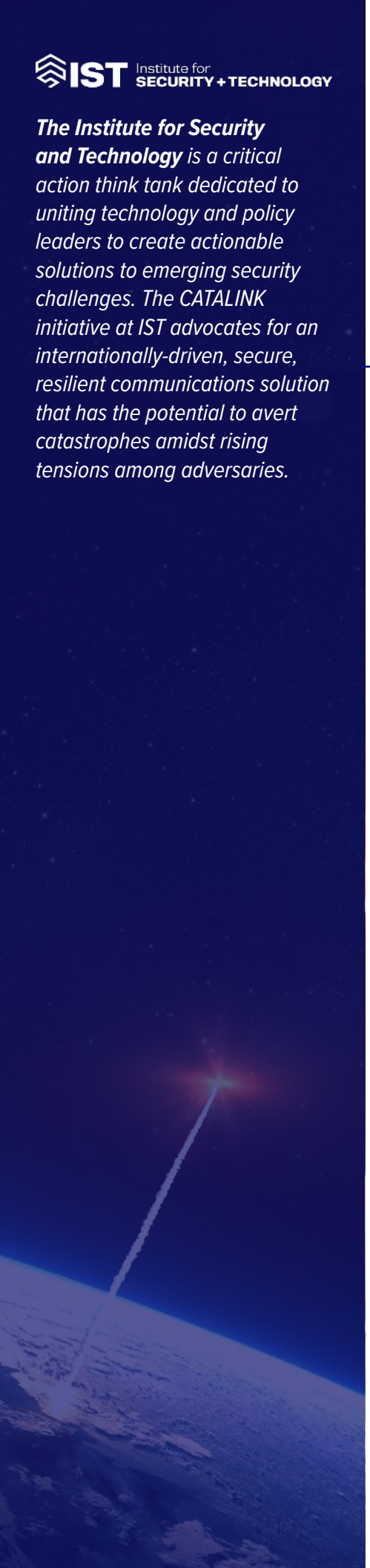

Use-Cases of Resilient Nuclear Crisis Communications: A View from Russia

Dmitry Stefanovich

Crisis communications do not seem to be a priority topic for analysis within the Russian strategic community. However, some data points can provide grounds for a hypothesis on when or at what point in time before or during a crisis Russia would want to use a multilateral/bilateral crisis communications mechanism, and how such a mechanism can be adopted.

Nuclear Risks

Naturally, we can start the analysis from the top level of national military-political leadership and the most dramatic domain of the possible crisis: nuclear use.

Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence, a strategic planning document that can be labeled "Russian Nuclear Doctrine," with a first version made public when it was released in 2020, includes a very specific provision: "The President of the Russian Federation might, if necessary, inform the military-political leadership of other states and/or international organizations about the Russian Federation's readiness to use nuclear weapons or about the decision taken to use nuclear weapons, as well as about the fact that nuclear weapons have been used."[1] This suggests that there is some level of understanding and reflection about the issue of crisis communications, both at conceptual and practical levels.

If we go deeper into history, one might find another very important document: the Agreement Between The United States of America and The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Nuclear War, signed in 1973. Article IV of this agreement provides for "urgent consultations with each other" in case of "the risk of nuclear conflict," including "between either Party and other countries."[2]

The so-called "hotline," or rather a "direct communications link" between Moscow and Washington had been established back in 1963, because the Cuban Missile Crisis provided relevant parties with a front-row view of the nuclear abyss.[3]

However, it took more than several decades for the next meaningful step in the

1 Vladimir Putin, "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, June 8, 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094.

2 Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, "Agreement between The United States of America and The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Nuclear War," U.S. Department of State, June 22, 1973, https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/5186.htm.

3 Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, "Memorandum of Understanding Between The United States of America and The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Regarding the Establishment of a Direct Communications Link," U.S. Department of State, June 20, 1963, https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/4785.htm.

Improving Nuclear Hotlines: Relevance and Use Cases

Should multilateral crisis communications systems be used before, during, or after a crisis? How would nuclear-armed states benefit most from such a system? What challenges stand between theory and implementation?

Established in October 2023, the CATALINK initiative's Crisis Communications Resilience Working Group is a network of experts and practitioners who work collaboratively to augment nuclear risk reduction efforts and promote the idea and implementation of effective, secure, multilateral crisis communications among nuclear-armed states.

This report is the third in ***"Improving Nuclear Hotlines: Relevance and Use-Cases,"*** *a series of short essays and interviews authored by working group members. These briefs assess the status of crisis communications systems in specific nuclear-armed states, present potential use case scenarios of multilateral crisis communications, and examine the current operating environments and political and technical barriers to cooperation in each state of focus.*

This series was compiled and edited by Sylvia Mishra and Christian Steins.

field of crisis communications: the establishment of formal Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres (NRRC). This paper will not dive deep into the history and practices of their operations, as it has already been done recently by other scholars.[4] Nevertheless, several points specific to the Russian case should be emphasized. First, in Russia, unlike the United States, the Ministry of Defense oversees the NRRC operations. Second, the NRRC itself oversees all arms control treaties and agreements, including multilateral (e.g. the Hague Code of Conduct) and bilateral agreements with other countries (e.g. ballistic missile and space launch vehicle launch notification agreement with China).

Non-Nuclear Domain

Other crisis communications cases involving the Russian side also demand some attention. Again, within the scope of this brief analysis there is no task to provide a total coverage of each case.

One of the relatively successful recent examples of crisis communications is the so-called deconfliction mechanism in Syria.[5] While imperfect, once established in 2015, it has prevented escalation and direct conflict between Russian and U.S. forces in the air and on the ground (and to some extent their provisional allies), despite frequent encounters. The most important takeaway here is that this mechanism is based on direct military-to-military communications.

In fact, U.S. legislators have almost entirely banned military-to-military contacts between Russia and the United States. Nevertheless, some high-level contacts (at the highest levels of Ministry of Defense/Department of Defense heads and heads of General Staff/Joint Chiefs of Staff) continued, including after the major warfighting started in Ukraine.

Yet another important episode that deserves attention is what can be labeled as a breakdown in crisis communications and a switch to public messaging. Over the spring and summer of 2020, the U.S. Strategic Command increased the tempo of bomber aircraft operations in the immediate vicinity of the Russian borders, including over the Baltic and Black Seas and Ukraine, which has been perceived in Moscow as an extreme change of traditional practices and a dramatic escalation. The Russian Ministry of Defense explicitly mentioned that while some notifications of such activities indeed happened, there was room for improvement. The 'deterrent patrols' by the U.S. bombers resulted in two specific briefings by the Russian MoD with very detailed explanations on how those were perceived and what the reactions were.[6] It remains to be seen how this mode of crisis communication affected the other side.

One of the most recent cases that is relevant to the topic under analysis is the announcement of the so-called 'special mode of combat duty' (sometimes

4 Rose Gottemoeller, Dan Zhukov, "Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers: A Stable Channel in Unstable Times," Stanley Center for Peace and Security, October 2023, https://stanleycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Nuclear-Risk-Reduction-Centers-Gottemoeller-Zhukov.pdf.

5 Juliette Faure, "The US-Russia military hotline in Europe: Key principles for risk reduction from the US-Russia deconfliction measures in Syria," European Leadership Network, March 17, 2022, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-us-russia-military-hotline-in-europe-key-principles-for-risk-reduction-from-the-us-russia-deconfliction-measures-in-syria/.

6 "Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy, Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, held a briefing for media representatives," Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, June 1, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12295316@egNews; "The Commander-in-Chief of the Aerospace Forces held a briefing for military attaches of foreign states," Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, September 11, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12313777@egNews.

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translated as 'high combat alert') for the Russian strategic deterrence forces in late February 2022.[7] As was explained later that year, it was "about the transition of shifts of strategic command posts to the duty with reinforced personnel. In essence, this means that vigilance has been heightened against acts of intimidation and coercion with nuclear weapons against our country."[8] However, at the time of the announcement it was an intentionally ambiguous statement that was made to enhance deterrent effects. As such, it could hardly include any immediate clarification through crisis communication links, existing or future. After all, every nuclear weapons state has its own calculus of the balance between transparency and ambiguity.[9]

Finally, a cyber domain should be mentioned, given the increasing link between cyber and nuclear issues.[10] Since 2013, a dedicated Russia-U.S. hotline has been operational, however so far it has been used with a very limited result.[11] Still, this experience can be used in future crisis communication solutions. What is peculiar about how it works is that it links both NRRCs and political staff, specifically the U.S. National Security Council and the Security Council of the Russian Federation.

Final Notes

It remains to be seen what the future of crisis communications for nuclear risks will be. Nevertheless, these communications links are extremely important, and the ongoing 'great power competition' means that their importance will only grow, as the escalation possibilities multiply. This importance of communication links is acknowledged both by documents and by actions, although, of course, non-communication in crisis is equally important. The institutional side of things might seem blurry but given the existing practices in the Russian case, the Security Council will remain at the helm, with the Ministry of Defense and the NRRC providing technological and personnel support. There is enough expertise to make it work, even in light of conflicting priorities at the political level, especially at the current stage of the conflict between Moscow and Washington. Should the governments of both countries find a way to accommodate each other's interests, it can provide an opening for a number of solutions in the realm of risk reduction. So far, however, the main concern is that 'the other side' is more interested in creating risks than reducing them, and the multi-domain and multipolar nature of the confrontation makes things even more complicated.

7 Matthew Luxmoore, "Putin Puts Nuclear Forces in a 'Special Mode of Combat Duty," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-02-26/card/putin-puts-nuclear-forces-in-a-special-mode-of-combat-duty--WKMRkTauWFNnWy26hZar.

8 Alexander Trofimov, "Statement by Representative of the Russian Delegation Mr. Alexander Trofimov in Exercise of the Right of Reply at the 10th NPT Review Conference," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, August 2, 2022, https://russiaun.ru/en/news/020822o.

9 Olga Oliker, Franziska Stärk, Maren Vieluf, Dmitry Stefanovich, "Truth or Dare - Transparency and Ambiguity in the Nuclear Realm," *Deep Cuts*, January 15, 2023, https://deepcuts.org/publications/working-papers/working-paper-truth-or-dare-transparency-and-ambiguity-in-the-nuclear-realm.

10 Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), "Reducing Cyber Risks to Nuclear Weapons: Proposals from a U.S.-Russia Expert Dialogue," Nuclear Threat Initative, September 2023, https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FINAL-Reducing-Cyber-Risks-to-Nuclear-Weapons_9.12.pdf

11 Erin Banco, Kevin Poulsen, "This Hotline Could Keep the U.S. and Russia From Cyberwar," *The Daily Beast*, March 7, 2019, https://www.thedailybeast.com/this-hotline-could-keep-the-us-and-russia-from-cyber-war.