# Talking with Russians

*Paul Ingram*

Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 the Europeans have adopted a strategy of isolating Russia economically, diplomatically and culturally. Intended to punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, this approach only serves to harden attitudes on both sides, deepen misunderstanding, raise the risk of conflict, and damages the capacity of the international community in handling global systemic catastrophic risk. And the evidence suggests that the European economies have suffered at least as much as or more than the Russian economy.

The biennial Moscow Non-proliferation Conference (MNC) attracts hundreds of people from government and think tanks from around the world, and we gathered again in March this year. This article is a series of personal takeaways and observations arising from my participation, at the conference rather than a coherent line of argument. The MNC includes a large number of Russian officials, think tankers and academics, alongside others from several other countries. Because of the strategic situation there was a very low representation from the Middle East this time around, a reduced Asian presence and a handful of participants from Europe.

## Triggers for instability and possible modes of engagement

There was strong consensus that the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is under severe challenge and that nuclear risks are rising, but that the issue is more important than ever. The principles of a cooperative negotiation approach are also critical as a counter to the current fashion of negotiating through strength and coercion. There was

*Paul Ingram is a Research Affiliate & Former Academic Programme Manager at the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at the University of Cambridge. He attended the Moscow Non-proliferation Conference in a personal capacity. These are his personal reflections.*

resentment frequently expressed at accusations of Russian illegal brutality when the US has frequently shown similar characteristics.

I sensed a tendency to point fingers at the US and Europe, a mirror to what Europeans do to Russia. I referenced this in the plenary, and observed that whilst often understandable, it does not help with the reconciliation that is essential between us. I suggested that we need to take more seriously structural challenges and consider how we escape the traps that lie in current assumptions and models of engagement.

Triggers for instability are everywhere and accelerating (strategic competition, emerging disruptive tech, weakening power and legitimacy of global institutions), and the need to manage it needed in every combination – bilateral, multilateral and global. A stronger sense of the complexities in the challenge of global cooperation demands a far greater understanding of different valid competing frames and perspectives, and diplomats and leaderships practicing more strategic compassion and recognition of differing interpretations.

There was also a sense expressed in Moscow that there can be malign forces at play that seek to damage or derail attempts to negotiate outcomes because some states pursue a strategy of dominance through instability and violence (e.g. Istanbul in April 2023, Israeli attempts to assassinate Hamas negotiators, Israeli/US military action in June 2025 and February 2026). This destroys trust and makes future negotiations far more challenging. There is much talk about the death of multilateralism, and the principal states involved all share some responsibility for this.

The confrontational approach we see today arises from both sides attempting to restore deterrence and keep the other side in check. I suggested to some in my conversations that the Chinese and Russians consider engaging explicitly with member states of the Stockholm Initiative, particularly European states, Japan and Korea, as a means to open-up diplomacy… picking up on their commitment within the Initiative to take a Stepping Stones Approach – open, adaptive dialogue, with a commitment to listen and to be sensitive to security concerns. The Stockholm Initiative states were preaching this in the 2022 NPT Review Cycle. This is clearly what is needed today. This would be particularly important at a moment when certain members of the Stockholm Initiative may be considering their own nuclear threshold status.

## The future of arms control

The conference considered the future of arms control. At present it looks bleak. Whilst the US is looking for trilateral (US-Russian-China) arrangements, this was seen by Russians as a non-starter (why China and not UK and France?), and it was said by them and Chinese participants that

it would need all the nuclear five involved. However, there was a good deal of doubt whether the US was serious about arms control at all, except as a means to freeze the balance in their favour. The sense from senior Russian MFA representatives was that strategic dialogue is effectively non-existent, and that the Russians do not have a serious partner. In any case, there was a strong sense that future arms control would be less about numbers and treaties than in the past, and more about political commitments, norms, banning weapon capability characteristics (e.g. Intermediate Nuclear Forces or Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems), integration of emergent disruptive technologies, managing the trust and confidence building mechanisms, verification, nuclear risk management (e.g. hotlines, military-to-military contacts), and continued discussion around doctrine. There is plenty on the agenda, and diplomats should be engaging far more than they have been.

I was on the panel specifically discussing the future of arms control and began by comparing the grief I felt for the loss of my dad (he died a week earlier), for the grief we all had for the strategic stability from arms control arrangements. I suggested that we should see arms control in the context of broader common security management, and that a good deal more use could be made of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to host many of these discussions by broadening its membership across Eurasia.

I suggested that we recognise the negative tit-for-tat trap that we are collectively caught in, and to change the tune. We all feel and express righteous condemnation of the other, damaging opportunities to cooperate. In the UK we are quick to condemn the human rights abuses of Russia and China – and there is clearly a case to answer – but we fail to recognize the weaknesses of our own government's record. I pointed out that I have been recently charged by UK police with terrorism offences for holding a sign opposing genocide, and I am due to go on trial in October. We can all too easily throw stones in glasshouses.

I offered an interpretation of the British position on arms control. I pointed out that there were three reasons why Britain has resisted joining arms control: (1) a policy of isolating Russia, such that the UK is unwilling to talk with Russian diplomats on anything at present (forgetting about its own contribution to the illegal wars and genocide in the Middle East); (2) UK belief in minimum deterrence, such that there is no room to negotiate down (though the fact that it recently went up in numbers, based on the supposed increase in offensive capabilities of adversaries somewhat undermines this point); and (3) alongside China and France, the UK has a policy of staying out of negotiations until the US and Russia have reached arsenal levels that are comparable.

I suggested that the UK position could shift in future, for perhaps surprising reasons:

1. The UK is desperate to remain relevant on the world stage, and would want a seat at the table – if this were a nuclear five process it would not block this.
2. The prime purpose of the UK Trident nuclear weapon system is to stay close to the Americans – if the Americans are there at the table then it makes sense for the UK to be beside them.
3. The UK likes to see itself as on the right side of international law and multilateralism (despite several black marks against its name in recent history).
4. The US might put pressure on the UK and France, because it has a stronger desire to see China at the arms control negotiating table, and would care less about European sensitivities.

I suggested that a nuclear five arms control conversation could triage from the current agendas of transparency and nuclear posture, and bring in declaratory policy at an early stage.

**The weakening of nuclear deterrence**

I also highlighted the weakening credibility of nuclear deterrence**.** The experience in relation to Ukraine was instructive. Whilst in European circles Russians are accused of reckless nuclear threats, Russian analysts clearly worry that the response to these threats demonstrate a recklessness on the part of the West, at first deterred but then increasingly audacious, despite the signalling. There was a concern that there may be no room left and Russia would be faced with a catastrophic choice. The extended war involving indirect confrontation between the two largest nuclear powers suggests a dynamic instability of deterrence over time as resolve is tested by salami-slice tactics, as sides seek advantage by nibbling away at the restraints.

The blame for this at the conference was laid strongly at the feet of the US Administration and its domestic and international allies, rather than any inherent problems and paradoxes, well documented, within the practice of nuclear deterrence itself. The desire was clearly on shoring up the practice of deterrence rather than looking for more effective alternatives for strategic stability between the great powers. With so much invested in the nuclear balance, Russia seems the least likely nuclear weapon state to change. I would suggest that if we have to live with the paradox, we must also channel the danger and the energy behind it to drive the transformation necessary in the direction of nuclear disarmament.

The NPT regime is also under threat by the perceived rising salience of nuclear weapons and several non-nuclear weapon states seeking the benefits for themselves. Chinese participants pointed particularly to the growing development of dual-capable platforms by East Asian US allies, an indication of a sophisticated threshold status that could easily cross the line at some future date. They admonished western allies for facilitating this, and one Russian observer said that he thought strategic stability (the management of nuclear risk) requires a mature nuclear culture, absent in many of these countries. The attack on Iran perhaps illustrates the unstable nature of a threshold status, previously seen as a desirable waystation, and could encourage others to take the North Korean approach: develop the capability in secret, and quickly cross the line before others can react.

## Nuclear testing

There have been particular stresses introduced into the test ban regime since Donald Trump's election. He has indicated a desire to test and has accused both Russia and China of conducting secret tests, without evidence. There was some discussion in particular around the seismic event in western China. Trump's threat to the test ban regime is an opportunity to strengthen its provisions. It was suggested that provisions in the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty when it comes into force could be utilized now, including information exchange, consultations and clarifications, voluntary on-site inspections and radionuclide trace monitoring, and other confidence-building measures. The International Monitoring System could be improved (although this will take investment). Much of the system is outdated. Unfortunately, there appears to be greater focus on national technical means rather collective solutions.

## The US war on Iran

The Iranians most certainly do not trust and have never relied upon the Russians. They recognize that Russia is more focused on Ukraine, and that Russia values a constructive relationship with the US more than it does with Iran. At the conference there was a lot of condemnation of US-Israel, but it was noticeably thin on strategy in relation to the war. It was noticeable to me how relaxed the Russians were (perhaps confident that US will not be coming after Russia anytime soon, which was less obvious in the first days of the war). Russia will see this more as a global, longer game of resisting the chaos rather than a strong immediate need to come to Iran's rescue, and indeed, Iran is not requesting it. The Russians appear to be content to see the US bogged down. Subsequent developments, including the Iranian control of oil and gas coming out of the region, and a shift away from the dollar, suggests that there is a renewed energy in those states seeking a move towards multipolarity in the international system.

I frequently made the point that this war demonstrates clearly that mass destruction does not necessarily bring victory and capitulation and that this should be a wake-up call to all who believe in nuclear deterrence. Clear bullying with nuclear threats can stimulate hardened resistance. Similarly, every military asset (e.g. base, carrier) is a target when war breaks out, and those that host them must expect to be a target too.

I asked a question in the conference of one of the Russian Deputy Foreign Ministers about the UN Security Council vote to condemn Iranian strikes on Gulf states (Russia abstained), whether this was an indication that Russia is looking for a mediation or arbitration role once it becomes clear that Iran will not capitulate and the Americans and Israelis start hurting badly. I was told to read the press release statement after the vote, but Russia did not want to send the message that they did not care about the Gulf states. The vote will not have been any surprise to the Iranians.

## Conclusion

The organisers of the conference, the Center for Energy and Security Studies (CENESS), deserve deep praise for their vision and tenacity in creating these conversations. More such opportunities are needed, and officials and civil society need to build the courage to take the plunge and engage in these conversations. Too often they engage in their echo chambers within their own communities, or with allies, and fail to recognize the damage they do by ‘othering’ the adversary.