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Opportunity to rid Europe of dangerous nuclear weapon systems and provocative force deployments

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By FREDERIC S. PEARSON AND ERIKA SIMPSON FEBRUARY 10, 2022

Diplomats could grab a golden opportunity during this crisis to de-alert and remove all short- and medium-range nuclear weapons from Western and Eastern Europe.



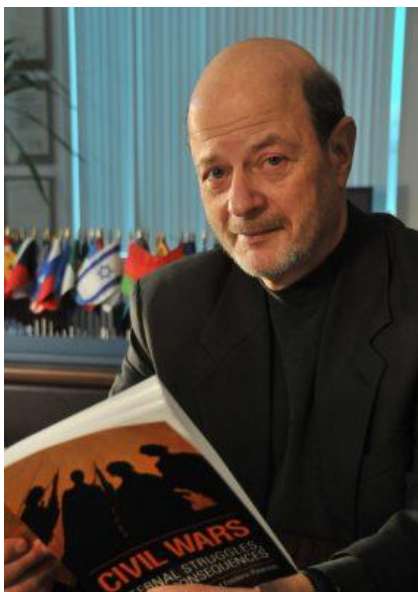
Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, left, has already publicly criticized the U.S. for 'amplifying' the risk, while Russian President Vladimir Putin's threat posture toward Ukraine is inciting the very NATO military build-up and consensus he presumably opposes, write Frederic S. Pearson and Erika Simpson. *Photographs courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*

As global citizens worry about involvement by the U.S. and its NATO allies in a full-fledged war between Ukraine and Russia, diplomats could grab a golden opportunity during this crisis to de-alert and remove all short- and medium-

range nuclear weapons from Western and Eastern Europe, returning to and [building upon](#) the now-expired [Intermediate Nuclear Forces](#) agreement from the *détente* era.

The United States' and NATO's official diplomatic replies regarding Ukraine and Euro-security delivered to Russia last week were somehow [leaked and published](#) by *El Pais*, the Spanish daily. Two documents, "NATO-Russia Restricted" and "Confidential/Rel. Russia," totaling nine pages are straightforwardly written and itemized, composed with few surprises and no abusive language. NATO and American diplomats appear willing to discuss different "concerns" using the thus-far dormant NATO-Russia Council (NRC).

The numbered items in both documents are technical or wide-ranging. Under Item 8.2, NATO reaffirms the allied commitment to NATO's [Open Door Policy](#) under Article 10 of NATO's founding Washington Treaty. At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Allied leaders agreed by consensus that Georgia and Ukraine might one day become members. Aspirant countries, presumptively qualifying as "democracies," can prepare for possible membership through the Membership Action Plan ([MAP](#)).



Frederic S. Pearson is a professor of political science and director of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Wayne State University. *Photograph courtesy of Frederic S. Pearson*

Alarmed by the prospect, however hedged it might be, of NATO's further expansion eastward into Russia's "near abroad," Russian President Vladimir Putin is [accusing Western nations](#) of ignoring key Russian security concerns as well as full implementation of the [2014 Minsk Protocol](#) stipulating increased autonomy for Eastern Ukraine's Donbas region.

There is no checklist for NATO membership, but emerging democracies officially must share the [alliance's values](#). Ukraine has considerable work to do to meet NATO's unwritten standards for eligibility, though NATO members [Bulgaria](#), [Hungary](#), [Poland](#), and especially [Turkey](#), might also be deemed problematic in upholding democratic values. Indeed, while premising democratic status, NATO inclusion has always been primarily about strategic geographic location in the alliance's founding premise of Soviet/Russian "containment."

Since NATO allies could certainly delay such weighty membership decisions, Russia's Ukraine conflict, especially if it does not result in war and retaliatory sanctions, could form the occasion for renewed European strategic *détente*, as well as a [reshaping of world economics and markets](#), even including China's interests in both Euro trade and Russian collaboration.

Indeed, the risks of the Ukraine-Russian dispute escalating to [large-scale nuclear-and-conventional warfare](#) could be ameliorated by item 9.3 in the documents that suggests "increasing transparency of exercises and snap exercises" in the region. Item 9.6 further suggests "reducing threats to space systems." All these proposals make common sense and are worth pursuing in a variety of negotiating forums including the European Union ([EU](#)), NATO Russia Council ([NRC](#)), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe ([OSCE](#)), and the United Nations ([UN](#)).



Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international politics at the University of Western Ontario and president of the Canadian Peace Research Association. *Photograph courtesy of Erika Simpson*

The leaked documents include a “Non-Paper” ranked as Confidential (not top secret) with proposals to improve security bilaterally. Its non-confrontational tone and main thrust emphasize that the NRC is the “appropriate” forum to discuss the “security of Europe.” There is some emphasis in the document on Russia’s newly-articulated concept of “the indivisibility of security,” along with reference to the 2010 [OSCE Astana Summit Commemorative Declaration](#), a document that highlights the right of each participating state to “be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance....”

The U.S. and other allied states remain “concerned” that Russia has contravened its commitments under the [1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances for Ukraine](#). However, the leaked document poses no direct accusations that, aside from the Crimea annexation of 2014, Russia has so far directly used force against the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Instead, the US declares its willingness to explore “nuclear risk reduction measures, including strategic bomber platforms.” The leaked documents mention the possibility of limitations on “deployments of intermediate and shorter-range land-based missiles.” Here then is an opportunity for nuclear risk reduction because the United States and Russia could rid Western and Eastern

Europe of dangerous, escalatory nuclear weapons that might become “soft targets,” vulnerable to military attack in a deepening crisis.

The medium-range B-61 nuclear bombs deployed in five NATO countries are credible bargaining chips that could be de-alerted and disarmed for the safety of both sides. The secret locations of U.S. nuclear weapons stored at U.S. and European bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Turkey were [accidentally included](#) in former Senator’s Joseph Day’s report, released in 2019, on behalf of the defence and security committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

In seeking reduced Russian border and regional troop reductions, Washington is also evidently prepared to discuss a “transparency mechanism to confirm the absence of Tomahawk cruise missiles at Aegis Ashore sites in Romania and Poland.” Russia poses legitimate concerns that NATO’s Aegis Ashore system for defending against short- or intermediate-range missiles [could use Tomahawk intermediate-range cruise missiles against Russian targets should they be deployed in Romania and Poland](#). A nuclear risk reduction agreement might, therefore, involve both Aegis limits and Russia’s calling back its deployment of [modern dual-capable missiles](#) and [threats to arm Kaliningrad](#), its enclave on the Baltic Sea.

Given the ideas being exchanged—as well as alarming potential forms of warfare, ranging from accidental clashes to competing cyber measures over Ukraine—basic assumptions about arms control and NATO membership need *not* revert to Cold War tension or early post-Cold War triumphalism. The West’s “sphere of influence” must not expand eastwards, past the Baltic divide toward Russia.

Despite “[unprecedented contingency plans](#),” no one, including the government in Kiev, relishes the idea of guerrilla war over eastern Ukraine because of Kiev’s tilt to the West. Nor does anyone want Ukraine to become the scene of

sustained military standoff and potential war scenarios, such as Germany's [Göttingen Corridor](#) or [Fulda Gap](#) during the Cold War years.

Both sides must make deep concessions and de-alert and de-operationalize Europe's mid- and short-range nuclear weapons—brandishing such weapons could heighten crises on the ground. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has already [publicly criticized the U.S.](#) for “amplifying” the risk, which he characterized as a “mistake in my opinion.”

In Putin's threat posture toward Ukraine he is inciting the very [NATO military build-up](#) and consensus he presumably opposes. He may also prove to be self-deterred by the grim toll of another Afghanistan-like [military quagmire](#). In today's crisis, there is a unique opportunity to rid Europe of its dangerous nuclear weapon systems as well as provocative force deployments on both sides.

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