No Fair-Weather Instrument: The Need to Rethink Military Confidence Building in Europe

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Abstract

The current crisis of confidence in Europe has clearly had an impact on defence and security relations between Russia and the West. Against this backdrop, the relatively constructive and well-functioning working relations that currently hold among arms control units clearly stand out, calling for a critical rethinking of how confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) contribute to increasing levels of trust among OSCE participating States. This paper outlines a new analytical framework that allows us to better understand how CSBMs contribute to increased levels of trust between arms control units, offering us a new perspective on how to enhance their positive effects on defence and security relations in times of increased political tension and distrust. The main takeaway of this new perspective is that CSBMs are not essentially dysfunctional but that many of their trust-building effects target the wrong actors and levels in defence and security politics. Amid the current crisis in European security, governments ought to focus on multilateral forms of verification, strengthen military-to-military contacts, find ways to extend the effects of CSBMs beyond the relatively small arms control community, and invest in more targeted confidence building at a higher political and military level.

Keywords

OSCE, military security, confidence- and security-building measures, arms control

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Introduction[1]

More than six years since the beginning of the conflict in and around Ukraine, Europe is still witnessing one of its profoundest crises since the end of the Cold War. The loss of trust between Russia and the West runs deep, and the conventional arms control and military confidence building regimes of the OSCE, once central to overcoming the divide between East and West, have ostensibly become just one of many arenas in which political and strategic tensions between Russia and the West unfold. In 2016, Russia blocked an update of the Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures, arguing that NATO's "policy of military containment of Rus-

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sia and the Alliance's concrete steps in the military sphere rule out the possibility of reaching agreements on confidence-building measures".[2] In 2020, President Donald Trump announced that the United States (US) would withdraw from the Treaty on Open Skies amid repeated complaints of Russian non-compliance.[3] With serious modernization efforts having been blocked for many years, and with mutual allegations of non-compliance and disputes about verification findings dominating the political agenda,[4] some have begun to question the viability of military confidence building altogether, dismissing the role of existing confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) as mere "fair-weather" instruments, functional only in already conducive political environments.

I argue that this negative outlook does not do justice to the current state of military confidence building in Europe. Not only did the Vienna Document and the Treaty on Open Skies provide valuable information at the beginning of the crisis in and around Ukraine,[5] but the relatively good working relations that continue to hold among arms control units also clearly stand out against the backdrop of the negative impact that mutual allegations and tensions have had on many political and high-level military channels between Russia and the West.[6] While some may dismiss these positive working relations as isolated incidents with limited impact, I argue that it is worth exploring the reasons for the seemingly disparate experiences at the political and the implementation levels.

This paper therefore calls for a critical rethinking of how to approach and understand the role of CSBMs in building trust among OSCE participating States. While the focus has traditionally been on the role and impact of CSBMs at a higher political and military level, I argue that a better understanding of how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust among arms control units provides valuable insights into how to strengthen the overall impact of existing CSBM regimes in times of increased political tension and distrust.

To this end, this paper will first discuss both the value and the shortcomings of the traditional focus on increased transparency and verification in military confidence building. Second, based on my doctoral research on trust and distrust in defence and security politics, the paper will present a new framework for understanding how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust among arms control units. The paper concludes with a discussion of how to apply these lessons to existing CSBM regimes so that military confidence building can have a more comprehensive impact on overall defence and security relations between OSCE participating States.

Trust, but verify: Shortcomings of a traditional approach to CSBMs

Traditionally, trust-building in defence and security politics has often been reduced to the simple paradigm: "Trust, but verify" (*Доверяй, но проверяй*). This Russian proverb, popularized by former US President Ronald Reagan during US–

Soviet arms control negotiations in the 1980s,[7] nicely captures the mainstream understanding of the role of arms control and military confidence building in defence and security politics. Through a combination of increased transparency and predictability regarding military forces, equipment, and activities, coupled with a thorough and intrusive verification regime, arms control and CSBMs are assumed to contribute to increasing trust among states.[8]

The problem, however, is that states can have considerable incentives to misrepresent or withhold relevant information, for example in order to secure a strategic advantage.[9] This problem seems to be particularly prevalent in situations where trust is already very low and where states have strong incentives to discredit the findings of verification measures, for example to obscure cases of non-compliance or to increase diplomatic pressure and isolate political opponents on the international stage. Adding to this problem is the fact that CSBMs, unlike most disarmament and arms control treaties, are usually not designed around a particularly thorough and intrusive verification regime. While the legally binding Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe contains provisions for comprehensive and intrusive verification of its disarmament and arms control obligations,[10] the politically binding Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures sets out only a limited number of less intrusive verification opportunities. For example, it only allows for three inspections and one evaluation visit for every 60 units reported in the annual information exchange.[11] In the case of Russia, this amounts to a maximum of three inspections and two evaluation visits per year.[12] Furthermore, the thresholds that would trigger a mandatory observation of larger-scale military activities are simply too high for the military realities of today, while OSCE participating States, above all Russia, have also found creative ways to avoid mandatory observations of their military exercises.[13]

It is therefore unsurprising that CSBMs frequently come under significant pressure in times of increased political tension and distrust and that policy debates on their modernization tend to focus on increasing the number of inspections and evaluation visits or on reducing the thresholds for notifying and observing certain military activities.[14] While undoubtedly of great importance, however, discussions on the modernization and strengthening of CSBMs should not be limited to questions of increased transparency and verification. While transparency and verification play an important role in reducing distrust by deterring (or at least detecting) possible violations by other states early on, there is a widespread understanding among scholars that no verification system – no matter how intrusive – can ever provide absolute certainty about another state's actual compliance.[15] In fact, the usual disputes over alleged cases of non-compliance and verification findings suggest that when trust is already low, verification measures may even have the opposite effect, reinforcing existing negative perceptions and contributing to even lower levels of trust in defence and se-

curity relations. In other words, it can be argued that if it is to dispel residual doubts, verification presupposes at least a minimum level of trust on both sides.[16]

This apparent dilemma prompts the difficult question of how to establish an initial level of trust in times of increased political tension and distrust. To address this problem, I suggest that we turn to the implementation level and to improving our understanding of how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust among arms control units.

Understanding military confidence building at the implementation level

To understand how CSBMs contribute to good working relations and increased levels of trust at the implementation level, I suggest building on Gordon Allport's conditions for constructive intergroup contacts and developing his original *contact hypothesis*[17] into a new framework for understanding and analysing the trust-building effects of CSBMs on interactions between arms control officers. In his original work, Allport suggested that intergroup contacts that (a) take place under conditions of *equal status*, (b) pursue *common goals*, (c) focus on *cooperation*, and (d) receive active *support from authorities* help to reduce prejudice and lower tensions between majority and minority groups in society.[18] This list of conditions was later complemented by arguments to the effect that intergroup contacts should also (e) allow for the development of *cross-group friendships*.[19]

Based on various interviews with arms control officers in the context of my doctoral research on trust and distrust in defence and security politics,[20] I will argue that these conditions also offer valuable insights into understanding how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust at the implementation level.

First, looking at the issue of *equal status*, it is interesting that most arms control officers not only share a general military background but also self-identify as part of a wider "arms control community" in which officers generally share a common understanding of how the different documents and treaties are to be implemented on the ground.[21] This common identity is felt even more strongly if officers come from the same level of command (tactical, operational or strategic), the same military branch (army, air force, navy), or if their countries have entered into some form of defence cooperation.[22]

Second, when it comes to the pursuit of *common goals*, the main objectives of the inspecting and the host team at first seem to differ rather substantially. While the inspecting team aims to verify the compliance of the inspected state, the host team is primarily concerned with striking the difficult balance between following the documents' provisions and carefully managing and, where necessary, limiting the inspecting team's access to sensitive military information. At the same time, both teams are aware that the host team of today will be the inspecting team of tomorrow, which ensures a considerable level of interdependence and helps to explain the usually friendly, pro-

fessional, and constructive atmosphere during the implementation of CSBMs.[23]

Third, this interdependence ensures a significant level of *cooperation* during the implementation of CSBM regimes. This cooperation, and in particular the personal interaction between the inspecting team and the host team that it involves, is considered by arms control officers to be one of the most important elements in forming trust at the implementation level. This effect is felt to be even stronger where the cooperation is centred on a clearly formulated common task, such as conducting collaborative observation flights under the Treaty on Open Skies or verifying certain military equipment in the course of an evaluation visit under the Vienna Document.[24] As one arms control officer put it: "You should be able to count. Not because the counting necessarily is important, but you must […] work on something [together]."[25]

Fourth, no matter how positive and trusting relations among arms control officers may be, the political guidance and *support of authorities* will likely remain a decisive factor in the implementation of CSBM regimes. Insofar as most governments have an interest in being perceived as complying with their obligations under international documents and treaties, arms control officers can at least count on general support for their work. At the same time, however, serious tensions at the higher political and military levels, whether related to non-compliance or the future direction of arms control and CSBMs, have also regularly led to serious disruptions to the implementation of arms control and CSBM agreements. This can express itself in more restricted access and reduced cooperation during verification measures.[26] In the worst case, political tensions can even result in a complete standstill, as occurred in the unresolved political dispute between Russia and Georgia that led to the complete cessation of all observation flights under the Treaty on Open Skies in 2018.[27] Interestingly, however, while arms control officers consider political tensions to be most prevalent in more political and formalized OSCE forums, committees, and bodies, they continued to describe the general atmosphere during evaluation visits, inspections, and observations as "friendly" and "professional".[28] In fact, several arms control officers underscore that they explicitly decide not to discuss difficult political issues in their interactions with arms control officers from other countries, instead focusing on the military-technical aspects of their jobs.[29]

Finally, professional encounters and in particular the social interaction during dinners, receptions, and bus or jeep rides seem to make CSBMs particularly conducive to the development of professional *cross-group friendships*. This is bolstered by the fact that the international arms control community is relatively small, and most officers remain in their respective positions much longer than their colleagues from other parts of the armed forces. This allows for the establishment of more personal relations and networks that can be used to resolve smaller problems before they reach the higher political and military level.[30]

In sum, applying the above framework for constructive intergroup con-

tact broadens our understanding of how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust at the implementation level and offers interesting new perspectives. Nevertheless, since many of these trust-building effects remain largely confined to a relatively small group of arms control officers, just how this broader understanding might also help to amplify the impact of CSBMs at a more general level remains to be discussed.

Rethinking military confidence building in Europe

Over the years, military confidence building in Europe has struggled to maintain its supposed stabilizing role in times of increased tension and distrust between OSCE participating States. While a better understanding of how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust between arms control officers will not resolve the deep political impasses that have long influenced discussions on the current state and future of arms control and CSBMs in Europe, it opens up new perspectives, revealing both the inadequacy of viewing existing CSBMs as "fair-weather instruments" and the shortcomings of focusing narrowly on a "trust through verification" approach in such discussions.

Based on the lessons learned from the effects of CSBMs at the implementation level, four major areas stand out when it comes to strengthening the impact of CSBMs in times of increased tension. First, even though limiting discussions to a mere "trust through verification" approach remains inadequate, it is still important for governments to try to reduce the level and scope of interpretation within existing verification regimes. While increasing verification quotas and lowering thresholds for the observation of military activities are certainly of value, greater attention should also be given to multilateral approaches to verification. Increasing multilateral verification could be achieved through the even more frequent formation of multinational verification teams or by exploring possibilities that would allow the OSCE to play a stronger role in verification.[31] Such multilateral approaches to verification have several advantages over current verification procedures. On the one hand, they elevate the discussions on verification findings above more conflictual bilateral relations and have the potential to provide a more impartial source of information. This seems particularly important in emerging crisis situations, where swift and appropriate responses are needed.[32] On the other hand, multilateral verification benefits from the additional trust-building results achieved through multinational verification teams, in which inspectors are usually equal in status and cooperate even more extensively in the pursuit of a common goal: verifying compliance.[33]

Second, since verification measures presuppose at least a minimum level of trust and often come under significant pressure as tensions between states rise, governments ought to invest even more effort in preserving, and ideally strengthening, constructive working relations at the implementation level. As we learned in the previous section, rather than focus-

ing narrowly on verification of compliance, a main objective here should be to increase the number of personal encounters and interactions between arms control units. Ideally, such interaction will take place in the pursuit of a clear and limited military task that fosters high levels of interdependence and allows those involved to avoid overly difficult and controversial political discussions. As already mentioned, a good example of this kind of trust-building interaction is the Treaty on Open Skies, which brings together air force officers from non-allied countries to conduct cooperative observation flights. Similar effects could also be achieved through the various options for military-to-military contacts, as suggested in Chapter IV of the Vienna Document, including visits and exchanges between officers and military units, participation in joint seminars, training and language courses, and conducting joint military exercises and training activities.[34] Although such measures are already elements of many CSBM regimes and have been implemented by various OSCE participating States, their more frequent and deliberate use in times of political tension and distrust should be considered.

Third, since the effects of CSBMs are currently largely confined to a small group of practitioners at the implementation level, governments should also explore ways to expand these effects and experiences to officers from a broader spectrum and different levels of command in the armed forces. To this end, even though the complex and technical nature of many arms control agreements and the establishment of meaningful interpersonal relations require time and expertise, it is worth considering putting (at least some) arms control officers on longer but regular rotation cycles (e.g. every five to ten years). To support these officers' careers as highly specialized subject-matter experts, such a rotation could occur, for example, between the implementation, the conceptual, and the political-ministerial level in CSBMs and arms control. Another way to ensure that CSBMs have a greater impact at the national level could be the regular inclusion of officers from different parts of the armed forces and desk officers from ministries of defence and foreign affairs in host, inspection, and observation teams. While some smaller countries, such as Norway and Sweden, already rely on a system of part-timers (mainly for reasons of limited personnel),[35] such an approach could also be of use in diffusing the trust-building effects of CSBMs more intentionally across a broader spectrum of areas and actors in defence and security politics.

Finally, while it is worth strengthening CSBMs and maintaining well-functioning relations between arms control units, it is important not to overstate their impact in overcoming current political and military tensions between Russia and the West. Since the roots of the current crisis run much more deeply, it is important for both sides to engage in more targeted trust-building efforts at a higher political and military level. Based on experiences at the implementation level, such efforts should ideally focus on areas of common interest, create high levels of interdependence, and ensure that interaction takes place under conditions of equal status.

Key examples of venues and formats that largely meet the conditions for constructive inter-group contact include the High-Level Military Doctrine Seminars[36] and study visits to increase knowledge of national defence planning procedures[37] foreseen in the Vienna Document, as well as various hotline agreements and bilateral formats at a higher political and military level, such as the recently resumed meetings of the German–Russian High Level Working Group on Security[38] and between the Norwegian and the Russian Ministries of Defence.[39] While such talks cannot guarantee the simple resumption of normal relations (or "business as usual"), they create venues and opportunities that allow for frank and open exchange on some of the most central dividing lines and underlying sources of tension between Russia and the West, such as the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, nuclear disarmament and arms control, the Iran nuclear deal, and the fight against terrorism.[40] At the multilateral level, similar exchanges could also take place under the OSCE Structured Dialogue, which provides for informal exchange among officials from state capitals and experts on current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area (e.g. arms control, threat perceptions, and military exercises and encounters)[41] or within the framework of the NATO–Russia Council.[42]

In sum, rethinking how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust in defence and security politics leads to new perspectives on how to strengthen their trust-building capacities in times of increased political tension and distrust. In addition to identifying ways to increase multilateral verification and to reduce the scope for interpretation in existing verification regimes, it allows us to appreciate and strengthen the potential of CSBMs when it comes to establishing more trustful relations at the implementation level and developing mechanisms that specifically target the political and strategic incompatibilities that currently define defence and security relations between Russia and the West.

Concluding remarks and policy recommendations

Amid mutual allegations of non-compliance and a deep crisis of confidence in Western–Russian relations, CSBMs have increasingly been dismissed as mere "fair-weather" instruments. As the discussions in this paper have shown, however, this purely negative assessment does not do justice to the current state of military confidence building in Europe and to the fact that the relatively well-functioning working relations between arms control units appear to have prevailed. In other words, the problem is not that CSBMs are essentially dysfunctional but that they generally do not target high-level decision makers in defence and security politics, confining many of their positive effects to a small group of arms control experts.

While constructive relations between arms control units will not be able to resolve the deep crisis of confidence that currently characterizes defence and security relations between Russia and the West on their own, this paper has shown

that applying a socio-psychological framework for constructive intergroup contacts allows us to gain a better understanding of how CSBMs contribute to increasing trust in interactions between arms control officers and opens up new perspectives on how to strengthen the role and impact of CSBMs in times of increased political tension and distrust. Based on the notion that constructive interactions should ideally (a) take place under conditions of *equal status*, (b) pursue *common goals*, (c) focus on *cooperation*, (d) receive active support from authorities, and (e) allow for the emergence of professional *cross-group friendships*, discussions on the future of CSBMs should give greater attention to the following issues and focus areas:

- *Multilateral verification.* While strengthening verification and reducing the scope for interpretation through increased verification quotas, lower thresholds, and a more rigorous verification regime are certainly important, governments should also put greater focus on multilateral approaches to verification, which not only offer a more impartial source of information in times of crisis but also benefit from additional trust-building effects among the members of the verification team. Multilateral verification of this sort could be achieved either by increasing the use of guest inspectors in national verification teams or by allowing the OSCE to play a greater role in verification.
- *Strengthen military-to-military contacts.* As verification presupposes at least a minimum level of trust to realize its stabilizing and trust-building potential, it is important for governments to invest even more in preserving and strengthening constructive working relations at the implementation level. Particular attention should be given to increasing interaction and forms of cooperation that focus on a clear and limited military task, foster high levels of interdependence, and allow for the avoidance of difficult political discussions. To this end, greater attention should be given to the various elements involved in increasing military-to-military contacts, as suggested in Chapter IV of the Vienna Document.
- *Rotation cycles for verification personnel.* To ensure that the positive experiences and trust-building effects of CSBMs are not confined to a small group of arms control experts, governments should also consider putting (at least some) arms control officers in longer but regular rotation cycles (e.g. five to ten years). To maintain and benefit from their experience and subject matter expertise, this rotation could occur, for example, between the implementation, the conceptual, and the political-ministerial level in CSBMs and arms control.
- *National guest inspectors and a system of part-timers.* Another step that governments might consider is to include officers from other parts of the armed forces and desk officers from ministries of defence and foreign affairs in their verification teams on a more regular basis. This would help to en-

sure that the positive effects and experiences of CSBMs are diffused across a broader spectrum of practitioners at the national level. Following the example set by some smaller countries, a system of part-timers in arms control could also be considered.

- *Political- and strategic-level confidence building*. Since the roots of the current tensions in Western–Russian relations run much deeper than current CSBMs may be able to reach, it is important for both sides to engage in more targeted trust-building efforts at a higher political and military level. Ideally, these efforts will focus on areas that are of common interest, that ensure high levels of interdependence, and that take place under conditions of equal status. Key examples of interactions that largely meet such conditions include the High-Level Military Doctrine Seminars foreseen in the Vienna Document and various hotline agreements and bilateral formats, such as the recently resumed meetings of the German–Russian High Level Working Group on Security and between the Norwegian and Russian Ministries of Defence. Such efforts should be understood not as a simple return to "business as usual" but as a means of paving the way for frank and open discussion about some of the most central dividing lines and underlying sources of tension in defence and security relations between Russia and the West. At the multilateral level, such an exchange could also take place under the OSCE Structured Dialogue on current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area or within the framework of the NATO–Russia Council.

Despite these areas for improvement, it is important to manage expectations and not to overstate the possible impact of CSBMs in times of increased political tension and distrust between OSCE participating States. It could be argued that, as long as both sides are unable to agree on the basis and substance of their defence and security relations, neither military-to-military contacts and dialogue nor transparency and verification regimes can hope to resolve the deep underlying political and strategic tensions between Russia and the West that characterize the present situation. Nevertheless, maintaining and strengthening the positive relations that have already been established between arms control units while working towards better and more trusting relations at a higher political and military level should still be an important objective for OSCE participating States when it comes to the future of arms control and CSBMs in Europe.

Notes

1 I sincerely thank the two anonymous reviewers of this paper for their useful feedback and comments.

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23 Schaller, cited above (Note 4), pp. 169-170.

24 Schaller, cited above (Note 4), p. 171.

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32 See Schaller, ibid.

33 See Schaller, cited above (Note 4), pp. 170-171.

34 See Vienna Document 2011, cited above (Note 11), Chapter IV: Contacts.

35 See Schaller, cited above (Note 4), p. 178.

36 See OSCE, cited above (Note 11), para. 15.7.

37 See OSCE, cited above (Note 11), para. 15.8.

38 See Federal Foreign Office, "Joint press release by the Federal Foreign Office and the Russian Foreign Ministry on the 13th plenary meeting of the German-Russian High Level Working Group on Security", 12 November 2018, at: https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/high-level-working-group-on-secuity/2160350.

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