



AMF Vienna Summary

Since its founding in 2003, the Aspen Ministers Forum (AMF) has brought together former foreign ministers and distinguished experts to explore critical issues facing the international community. Recent meetings have focused on the global refugee crisis, the revival of anti-democratic tendencies around the globe, and the challenges and opportunities facing Africa.

In November 2019, the 25th session of the AMF convened in Vienna. Over the course of three days, ministers examined the current state of nuclear arms control and the challenges emerging technologies pose to international stability. Together the group identified areas ripe for state cooperation and priorities policymakers can set to address both urgent and important challenges under the new threat landscape.

Assembled experts unanimously agreed the risk of nuclear confrontation is growing as a result of the dissolution of the INF Treaty, U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, the precarious status of New START and North Korean nuclear activities. Adding to the risk of escalation are great power competition, gray zone attacks masking political intent, governments overestimating their abilities to thwart escalation, and increased incidences of military contact. Overall, ministers agreed the traditional framework for arms control needs rebooting, and leaders should place a new focus on achieving strategic stability.

What does strategic stability mean? Under the new threat landscape, assured mutual vulnerability. Parity no longer stands to prevent an arms race given the stealth of new tools and weaponization of advanced technologies. Everything from hypersonic technology to 5G networks can facilitate disaster on the scale of a nuclear attack. As a result, nuclear arsenals no longer constitute the only threat to strategic stability.

This operating environment demands fresh commitments to transparency and predictability. States should participate in voluntary information sharing and place greater emphasis on the quality and sophistication of verification regimes. Both Russia and the United States should affirm their commitment to transparency measures beyond the 2021 deadline to extend New START. Furthermore, parties need open communication channels for regular dialogue as sustained contact can build the confidence and set the norms to incentivize restraint during crisis decision-making.

In the past, regular engagement has laid the groundwork for interim security agreements under a stepping-stone approach to nuclear security. SALT would not have been possible without the early hotline agreement and later Test Ban Treaty. Moreover, the United States passed the Test Ban Treaty as an environmental regulation, proving the value of cooperation outside the nuclear framework.

To initiate U.S.-Russia engagement, experts suggested the governments begin by consulting on areas of shared concern. Leaders might jointly list the threats of nuclear war and gray zone attacks of comparable proportion, pinpointing areas of mutual interest and beginning risk reduction.

As for who should be at the table crafting the new security architecture, ministers concluded all states – not merely Russia and the United States – are stakeholders. At the same time, roles will vary, new participants should join, and multiple forums can take on the work. While bilateral talks between the United States and Russia are critical to securing existing stockpiles, parallel dialogues among the P5, G7, and others should begin building new transparency and predictability models. Productive conversations will require technical experts briefing policymakers and industry standard-setting groups advising regulators on stronger safety measures for grey zone technologies.

While participants acknowledged the historic centrality of American leadership in building the decades-old institutions and norms undergirding today's security environment, ministers noted the decline of U.S. global leadership and warned of the implications for proliferation, great power competition, and international cooperation. Taken together, countries are reassessing America's willingness to engage in world affairs, let alone lead the charge for a secure and peaceful global order. As one expert asked, "What happens when a hegemon becomes a disruptor?"

Doubt surrounding the integrity of the U.S. nuclear umbrella has led non-nuclear states in two directions: seeking weapons programs and turning to other nuclear-armed states for security. This is giving rise to new regional power brokers and diminishing U.S. influence. Meanwhile, China is stepping up its role, consciously cultivating its image as a responsible actor by matching P5 measures when signing the Arms Trade Treaty. Despite steadfast support among the American public for a traditional foreign policy agenda affirming the value of alliances, NATO Article 5, human rights, democracy, and international trade, European publics and leaders are beginning to lose faith in the United States as a credible ally and guarantor of international security.

On Day Two, ministers turned to the challenge of moderating activity in the gray zone, where actions short of war are nonetheless disruptive, coercive, and capable of kinetic impact. Applicable domains range from space to cyber, energy, information, and undersea. As the zone remains largely unregulated, states are making strategic inroads against the defense and security systems of their adversaries.

An opportunity for governments to deliver short-term stability against these vulnerabilities and to generate norms in the gray zone is to adopt the framework for managing asymmetric threats. Under this model, states list acceptable behaviors then agree on proportionate responses. Such standardized procedures can legitimize responses to acts short of war and reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation. With time, assigning responsibility and meting out punishments can impose order while states piece together a more comprehensive legal regime to regulate gray zone activity.

The delay on legal regimes to date ranges from a desire to maintain competitive advantages through new technology to the fear of stifling innovation and the belief that advanced tactics can achieve strategic aims with much lower risks of inflicting harm. States, regional alliances, and international bodies are carefully weighing the institutional guardrails they would like to set against the capabilities they are willing to relinquish. In cyber, for instance, the United States operates under a "persistent engagement" approach, precluding any offensive capability agreement. NATO faces a similar conundrum due to variable risk tolerances among member states. The result is an alliance with no defensive cyber measures or offensive cyber theory.

Finally, in an exercise demonstrating the critical need to link policymakers with technical experts, ministers examined with great alarm the most pressing but overlooked challenges to international security. Among those were biological weapons. Scientists today can manufacture pathogens at a fraction of the cost of new vaccines. In this context, the impacts low funding, little planning, and lagging resources have on strategic stability are monumental. In an effort to better educate the public around these threats, and to harness the energy of younger generations, ministers agreed to host the next AMF meeting at Georgetown University in the spring.

Overall, mitigating accident risk is a growing priority under the umbrella of overall risk management. The good news is, with regard to the threats nuclear weapons and emerging technologies pose, forums are available to address these challenges, parties can come together to close knowledge gaps, and frameworks exist to implement interim security measures and build trust in any political climate. What a new framework for strategic stability requires is organization, communication, and political will.