In light of the escalating war following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical tensions involving nuclear powers will continue to rise throughout 2022. At the same time, multilateral institutions tasked with managing conflict-related risks, appear weak, at a time when they are most needed.

Although the United States, Russia and other established nuclear powers have taken some steps to avoid a catastrophic war – including the 2021 agreement between Moscow and Washington to extend the New START Treaty – they are also working on upgrading their atomic arsenals. Russia has raised its nuclear alert levels during the war with Ukraine. After its most recent nuclear test in 2017, meanwhile, DPRK has continued to conduct missile tests despite United Nations (UN) sanctions. In South Asia, India has skirmishes with both Pakistan and China (with serious incidents in 2019 and 2020, respectively), accentuating concerns about broader conflicts with its nuclear-armed neighbours. Although a direct confrontation between China and the United States over Taiwan is unlikely in the short term, the rivalry between the two powers is deepening.

In parallel, the UN and other multilateral security institutions frequently seem adrift. The Trump administration’s rejection of pacts such as the Iranian nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) and the Open Skies Treaty contributed to a broader “crisis of multilateralism”. This has dissipated but not disappeared with the arrival of the Biden administration. Major power tensions have stopped the UN Security Council responding effectively both to conflicts in which some of the leading nuclear powers are directly involved (such as Syria and Ukraine) and regional conflicts where their interests are more limited (such as the war in Ethiopia and the coup in Myanmar). Russia blocked the Council from taking any action in response to its attack on Ukraine in February 2022, which also raised questions about the durability and credibility of multilateral European security mechanisms.

Despite these challenges, multilateral institutions continue to play significant – if often under-appreciated roles – in addressing conflicts involving nuclear-armed powers. These include:

- **Providing frameworks for cooperative counter-proliferation efforts:** China, Russia and the U.S. continue to work through the UN Security Council to contain DPRK’s nuclear program through sanctions, despite differences over their implementation. The Permanent Five (P5) members of the Council and others have also attempted to revitalize the JCPOA over the last year, working closely with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
• **Limiting risks of armed conflict involving nuclear-armed states:**
Multilateral peace operations monitor troubles-spots on the borders of some nuclear-armed states, providing tripwires against unintentional escalations in conflict. In the Middle East, UN and non-UN peacekeepers patrol Israel’s borders with Lebanon, Syria and Egypt, creating buffers between the Israelis (who have reportedly maintained an undeclared nuclear arsenal since the 1960s) and their neighbors. In Ukraine, observers deployed by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) kept watch on the line of contact between Ukrainian and Russian-backed forces in the east of the country from 2014 to this year’s conflict, offering objective reporting of the risks of escalation.

• **Mediating “second order” conflicts involving nuclear powers:**
Although nuclear powers have avoided direct large-scale confrontations, they have increasingly become involved – overtly or by proxy – in civil wars such as those in Libya and Syria. In these “second order” conflicts (where the risks of escalation are limited, but the nuclear powers have conflicting interests) UN mediators continue to try to find political solutions or, when that proves impossible, at least facilitate humanitarian aid. The UN also shares the burden of keeping aid flowing to Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban takeover – an issue of concern for multiple nuclear powers (including China, India, Pakistan and Russia as well as the U.S.).

Multilateral institutions may not be well-placed to mediate arms control bargains between Beijing, Moscow and Washington. However, they retain an important role in (i) containing proliferation risks and (ii) preventing, mediating and mitigating local and regional conflicts that might exacerbate tensions between major and minor nuclear powers. For the International Crisis Group – which contributes to early warning and preventive work through on-the-ground conflict analysis – limiting local and regional conflicts is an essential part of maintaining international peace and security, in parallel with arms control and disarmament diplomacy. Multilateral bodies such as the UN, OSCE and IAEA are imperfect and face political headwinds, but still play a significant part in managing conflicts and avoiding escalation risks.
UN Secretary-General António Guterres underlined the importance of addressing nuclear risks in his 2021 report “Our Common Agenda”, which also emphasized the importance of conflict prevention. He has tasked UN officials with drafting a “New Agenda for Peace” by the second half of 2023, and this should cover both crisis management and disarmament. Looking ahead, a number of events at the UN offer opportunities to discuss these issues further:

- **The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference**, delayed from January due to COVID-19, is now expected to take place in August. UN diplomats and civil society can use this as a catalyst for discussion of the UN’s role in reducing conflict risks more generally;

- **The annual “high-level week” of the UN General Assembly**, which begins with a speech by the U.S. President on 20 September, will likely have a strong security focus in light of the war in Ukraine and the UN’s limited ability to respond to the crisis;

- Looking further ahead, the UN should have its New Agenda for Peace ready for a **“Summit of the Future”** in 2023 (most likely in September), which should be a major focus for organizations concerned with revitalizing multilateral security and the UN in general.