



Stability amid Strategic Deregulation: Managing the End of Nuclear Arms Control

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Stability amid Strategic Deregulation: Managing the End of Nuclear Arms Control

That nuclear arms control is on the way out is no news. The unraveling of its Cold War-era architecture started almost two decades ago, when US President George W. Bush welcomed Vladimir Putin to his ranch at Crawford, Texas and told the then-young Russian leader that he intended to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The withdrawal from this 1972 treaty, which placed severe restrictions on both countries' strategic defenses, was a severe blow to the Russians, who had long considered it a cornerstone of strategic stability. Bush, however, couldn't care less. The Cold War was over, and several countries around the world were busy developing ballistic missiles that required US response. Russia was neither an adversary nor a close partner of the United States, and it was lying flat on its back. While Washington was pointing to North Korean and Iranian missile programs, Moscow suspected it was seeking strategic superiority over both Russia and China.

In 2019, President Donald Trump took the United States out of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The 1987 agreement had eliminated a whole class of missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km, and its signers touted it as a major step toward strategic stability and US-Soviet understanding. However, the INF treaty had been in trouble for some time as a result of US complaints about Russian treaty violations,¹ countered by Moscow's own accusations leveled against Washington. Both Russia and the United States were also wary of continuing with self-imposed restraint while the rest of the world, particularly

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China, was free to develop and deploy INF systems. Thus, the decision taken by Trump was clearly a strategic move aimed at China, and potentially Russia, evoking bad memories of the 1980s US INF deployments in Europe, when US *Pershing II* ballistic missiles and ground-based cruise missiles (installed to counter the Soviet Union's SS-20 systems targeting Western Europe) were positioned just a few minutes' flight away from Soviet targets.

The INF withdrawal was by no means the end of global arms control dismantlement. In 2020, President Trump walked out of the 35-nation Open Skies Treaty allowing aerial inspections of NATO and Russian territory. More importantly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has publicly speculated that the US administration had already decided not to extend the 2010 US-Russian New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) on strategic nuclear arms that expires in February 2021, leaving its fate hanging in the balance.² Russia favors a five-year extension, as provided for under New START, but it would not plead for it, let alone make unilateral concessions to the United States. Russians are also concerned over reports of the internal discussion in Washington about the United States leaving the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) that the Americans signed, but never ratified.³

From the Russian perspective, although the anti-arms control trend has the fingerprints of Donald Trump and his advisers all over it, the deregulation also fits within a broader pattern of US foreign policy over the last four years. After a brief era of US global dominance that followed the end of the Cold War, Washington has again found itself in the environment of major power competition. Only this time, the competition is not primarily with Russia, but with China—and the United States is determined to win to reassert its primacy. Anything else, like some sort of a compromise, would presumably be seen in Washington as a clear loss of status and a confirmation of US decline. China has mounted a serious challenge to the global standing of the United States that calls for a concentration of US resources and a policy position of strength vis-à-vis Washington's new chief rival.

What can be made of this deregulation? It is certainly introducing a huge dose of unpredictability into the global strategic equation. Many analysts mourn the coming loss of US-Russian nuclear arms control, and some hope to salvage at least some elements of it. Yet, even without arms control, deterrence will remain the bedrock of strategic stability. The geopolitical, technological, doctrinal, and psychological developments since the end of the Cold War make past agreements inadequate and new ones difficult or impossible in the new strategic environment. The task at hand is to learn to manage strategic stability in a much more complex polycentric nuclear world where the US-Russian axis has long ceased to be strategically central, and the US-Chinese one has not emerged to replace it in the global security domain. This article will examine

these new challenges and offer some ideas of managing a deregulated environment in the absence of traditional arms control.

Geopolitical Challenges to Nuclear Arms Control

The salient feature of traditional arms control has been its bilateral US-Russian nature and its wider context of bipolar confrontation. This context cannot be replicated in the new environment of multiple nuclear actors, each of which has its own strategic agenda. The emerging US-China bipolarity is not developing either into a strategic relationship similar to the US-Soviet one or provoking the kind of nuclear arms relationship reminiscent of the one that brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the negotiating table. Trilateral US-Russian-Chinese arms control should be a logical answer, but China is not interested for now, which nixes the prospect for “central”—i.e., three major powers—arms control for the foreseeable future.

Bipolarity and bilateral arms control cannot be replicated with multiple nuclear actors

China

The United States and Russia may continue to be the world’s only two nuclear superpowers, but the recently revived US-Russia confrontation is no longer the central axis of global politics. Washington and Moscow may still possess over 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons, but they cannot jointly control the global strategic environment. On the other hand, China, while challenging the United States for global primacy, is lagging far behind it in terms of the size and capabilities of its nuclear arsenal. In contrast to the United States and Russia—who initiated their arms control dialogue over 50 years ago and have amassed rich experience in the process of negotiation, codification, and implementation of agreements and their verification—China and the United States have yet to begin talking.

Over the last three decades, China and Russia have become ever closer partners. Their relationship can best be described as an entente: a broad agreement between the leaderships of both countries on the key points of world order, attitudes toward the United States, and close economic and military ties as well as a largely effective way of managing conflicts of interest and disagreements between them. Yet, both Beijing and Moscow—despite all the economic asymmetries—see themselves as great powers that pursue independent policies. The underlying principle of their relationship is the principle of “never against each other;

not necessarily always with each other,” a convenient combination of reassurance and flexibility.

Despite their current friendship, Russia and China have a checkered history of relations, which in the second half of the past century included nearly three decades of bitter confrontation along their long common border. Both countries are nuclear powers, and the prospect of a nuclear war between them was once seriously discussed. Moscow and Beijing have never engaged in nuclear arms control negotiations and are not bound by any agreements in that field other than de-targeting their missiles. In strategic and military-technological matters overall, Russia is still ahead of China, which allows it to balance somewhat the otherwise asymmetrical relationship that favors its neighbor. The two countries, while professing advanced strategic partnership, are not taking each other for granted and are building trust incrementally through cooperation at different levels on the basis of common interests. America’s adversity toward both helps, but it is not fundamental for the relationship.

The amusing detail is that, even as Washington treats both Beijing and Moscow as adversaries, it expects Russia to help drag China to the negotiating table.

In 2010, Moscow had in mind adding the UK and France, not China, to further nuclear negotiations

Moscow did indicate, back in 2010 when New START negotiations concluded, that any further nuclear reductions would have to include other nuclear powers besides the United States and Russia itself—it had in mind, above all, the United Kingdom and France—but it never assumed those others would have to be pressured to negotiate.⁴ Under the conditions of US-Russian confrontation, asking Moscow to become a tool of US policy is preposterous. “We will not be fetching chestnuts out of the fire to please the

United States,” commented Sergei Ryabkov, Russia’s deputy Foreign Minister in charge of North America and arms control issues.⁵

Regardless of Russia’s involvement, however, China will not negotiate. China is adamant that its presumably small nuclear arsenal not be made the subject of arms reductions or even arms control alongside much bigger nuclear forces of the United States and Russia. The Chinese arsenal is not only smaller, it is structurally different, with most missiles in the INF range and only a relatively small number of long-range nuclear weapons, and it has been built to serve a very different nuclear posture, policy, and strategy than the US or Russian ones. Rather than targeting the territory of its notional great-power enemy, China focuses on the US assets in the Western Pacific and Taiwan.

Washington is correct to point to the need to bring Beijing along; it is not correct, however, in its impatience and imperious attitude. China will not succumb to US demands that it does not consider appropriate. Before it ever agrees to talk, particularly about weapons numbers, it will certainly study the Russian experience in the field closely; and it will have to develop its own approach to arms control and integrate it into China's foreign and defense policy. Meanwhile, Sino-American confrontation will intensify.

Even assuming that China will one day come on board alongside the United States and Russia to negotiate arms limitations and reductions, there will be many other missing pieces. From the days of the INF and early START talks in the mid- and late 1980s, Moscow has insisted on including the nuclear forces of Great Britain and France, which are part of the Western alliance, in negotiations on arms reductions. London and Paris, of course, seeing their arsenals as the weapons of last resort, refuse to join—with full understanding from the United States.

South Asia

So far, arms control has been practiced by the most heavily armed nuclear powers. In the current strategic environment, however, numbers are not the key factor when it comes to strategic stability. Smaller nuclear power rivals may be more likely to come to blows and cross the nuclear threshold. There, South Asia immediately comes to mind.

India and Pakistan both joined the ranks of nuclear powers at the turn of the 21st century and have since developed a nuclear arsenal and deployment strategy. India sees Pakistan, a neighbor with which it carried out nuclear tests practically simultaneously, as its adversary. Indo-Pakistani relations have remained tense since the partition of British India in 1947—the two countries have fought three wars and engaged in a number of serious incidents that risked escalation to a new full-scale war. Despite numerous attempts at reconciliation, India and Pakistan remain basically hostile toward each other, with the issue of Kashmir continuing to generate intense animosity. There is no arms control agreement between New Delhi and Islamabad—just some communications links. Fashioning such an accord is out of reach for the foreseeable future. The Indian and Pakistani arsenals are relatively small, but the likelihood of their use in a conflict situation is too close for comfort.

India views China, which is also Pakistan's senior ally, as a strategic rival and adversary. The deadly border incident in June 2020 in the Himalayas, the most serious one since the 1962 Sino-Indian war, has highlighted the dangers of conflict between Asia's two biggest powers. As between India and Pakistan, escalation of a conventional conflict over a disputed border region is a likely route toward the use of nuclear weapons.

Pakistan, for its part, is wholly focused on India, but it remains the only Muslim country armed with nuclear weapons, and that role, too, should not be ignored in Islamabad's desire to maintain its nuclear weapons. These asymmetries—China preoccupied with the United States, while eyeing India with some disdain; India focusing on China and Pakistan, with Pakistan keeping India in its cross-hairs while possessing the only “Islamic bomb”—make any arms control agreement in Asia that might only include some countries, but not others, highly problematic.

North Korea

North Korea is perhaps the smallest nuclear power in today's world, but its case is highly significant. Having developed a still very imprecise means of delivery, this otherwise third- or fourth-tier power with notoriously inscrutable leadership has acquired an ability to hold the mightiest nation, the United States, at nuclear gunpoint. Pyongyang's nuclear and missile program sends a chilling message: nuclear weapons are the ultimate equalizer. Quantity doesn't matter as much as it used to. Being able to deliver a nuclear payload to an enemy home base is enough for deterrence.

The key factor is that Pyongyang's nascent but growing nuclear capability can pose a threat not only to the US forces in South Korea and Japan, but possibly even to part of the US national territory. The Trump administration's approach to North Korea is aimed at eliminating Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities rather than engaging it in arms control. The goal of North Korea's complete and verifiable denuclearization, however, appears unrealistic: for Pyongyang, nuclear weapons and long-range missiles are the only guarantee of regime survival. Instead of nuclear disarmament, arms control should be doable in principle, but it remains politically unpalatable to Washington.

The Middle East

As if the Asian nuclear cases were not enough to illustrate the geopolitical complexities of the post-Cold War era, the situation is compounded by nuclear proliferation risks in the Middle East that threaten to upend regional stability and impact the global strategic environment. Should Iran eventually develop nuclear weapons—along with the intermediate-range missiles it has been producing and perfecting for a long time—it would likely provoke its rivals and neighbors Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and maybe Egypt to join the race.

There is now uncertainty about Iran's nuclear program, once capped under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany. The Trump administration's 2017 withdrawal from the JCPOA accord—despite the willingness of

the other signatories to remain within the agreement—puts the future of the agreement in doubt. The January 2020 showdown between Washington and Tehran over the killing of a top Iranian general in a US strike did not lead to a military conflict, but it made a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue even less feasible. Even if Donald Trump loses the November 2020 election, a simple return to the status quo ante between the United States and Iran is improbable.

Israel, of course, is the only presumed nuclear power in the Middle East. It keeps an arsenal, which is universally understood to serve as the ultimate deterrent. There is no doubt that the Israeli arsenal is unlikely to be placed under any outside restrictions. For those who aspire to build nuclear capabilities for themselves, however, Israel serves as a justification for their ambitions.

This overview of the global geopolitical and strategic landscape demonstrates that the Cold War model of nuclear arms control is inadequate for a world where the relationship between the United States and Russia has undergone fundamental transformation, become hugely asymmetrical, and ceased to be the central axis of global politics. Unsurprisingly, it also shows the immense complexity of organizing an arms control regime with several nuclear powers of different caliber with incompatible strategic cultures and complicated relationships among themselves. What is particularly unfortunate is that even what appears as the next logical step—involving China, currently America's principal overall challenger, into a dialogue on strategic stability and eventually arms control—turns out to be difficult and probably impossible in the short- and medium-term.

Major Power Arms Control Isn't Coming Back

The United States still has significant advantages—technological, industrial, strategic—over China and Russia, and the logic of rivalry dictates that it makes full use of those. Why should Washington still be bound by treaties with Moscow, which is no longer its strategic equal, when China poses a credible threat? The United States needs to be completely unbound. The strategy that worked against the Soviet Union could be tried again: pressure US opponents into conceding to US demands or bankrupt them in a new arms race. This strategy would today be aimed at China in the first place, and then also at Russia.

In November 2020, the United States is facing a presidential election. If Joe Biden becomes the next US president, arms control could be rehabilitated—but only a little bit. New START can still theoretically be salvaged by February 2021. Follow-on talks with Russia on strategic issues might begin, but a positive result is by no means guaranteed. US-Russia relations are fundamentally broken and impossible to repair in the foreseeable future. Even a minimum of goodwill that is required to start serious negotiations is lacking. To most in the US political class, Russia remains absolutely toxic.

Russia's foreign policy is unlikely to change in the direction desired by the United States. In Moscow policy circles, the Trump administration is regarded as wholly untrustworthy. In particular, no "walks in the woods" to sketch out the contours of a possible accord are possible anymore: Americans leak information profusely, for short-term political reasons. Whoever wins in November, US domestic politics will hardly see a truce in the bitter partisan war. In this climate, any agreement negotiated and signed with Russia will face an exceedingly difficult time in the US Senate. Even in the much quieter and more civil atmosphere of a decade ago, the New START ratification was not immediately assured.

As diplomats are stymied, strategists seem to be rehabilitating ideas about a limited nuclear war.⁶ Despite official Russian protestations, many in the United States and NATO countries believe that Moscow seeks a strategy of "escalating

Russia is concerned that limited nuclear warfighting scenarios are gaining currency in the West

to de-escalate"⁷—in other words, using nuclear weapons in a conventional military conflict that it fears it might lose. On the Russian side, there is concern that limited nuclear warfighting scenarios are gaining currency in the West. A Moscow proposal to Washington to formally restate the Reagan-Gorbachev statement that "nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought" has unexpectedly gotten stuck in the bureaucratic morass on the US side, thus only enhanc-

ing Russian concerns.⁸ The new emphasis in the United States on small-yield nuclear weapons is backing up those concerns with material evidence.

Russia itself, of course, has just completed a new round of nuclear force modernization, with the development and imminent deployment of the fifth-generation silo-based ICBM *Sarmat* (RS-28 or SS-X-30) with the hypersonic *Avangard* guided warhead that has an enhanced capability to obviate and penetrate US missile defenses. The United States is on the cusp of its own nuclear modernization program. However, including these new systems that simply modernize older ones in a hypothetical new US-Russia arms control agreement is not as difficult as dealing with a range of wholly new developments that have greatly complicated the strategic weapons environment. Beyond advanced missile defense systems, these developments include the prompt global strike concept and the emergence of strategic non-nuclear systems linked to it, the emergence of space-based weapons, and the role of cyber tools in the strategic sphere. There is also the issue of entanglement: joint basing of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons that are hard to distinguish by a target country.

Thus, arms control is no longer about numbers of generally similar weapons; it is about the capabilities of a broad range of diverse systems, each of which impacts

the strategic calculus. Placing all this under effective control and verifying the implementation of agreements will be enormously difficult, if at all possible. So, from a technological perspective, future arms control will be exceedingly challenging—much more difficult than it was during the Cold War.

Effective Deterrence

So much for the bad news. The good news is that, despite a popular impression, arms control is neither synonymous with global strategic stability nor is it the bedrock on which such stability rests. Historically, arms control has been helpful in managing relations between the two rival nuclear superpowers, providing them with a measure of mutual confidence by means of on-site inspections, and partially restraining the arms race between them. This relationship management is what the United States and Russia, and indirectly the rest of the world, are in danger of losing now through nuclear deregulation. But nuclear deterrence, not arms control, is the real bedrock of strategic stability, and it is not vanishing.

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At the end of the day, it is the certainty of nuclear annihilation that keeps the United States and Russia from engaging in hostilities over any number of issues that set them against each other. To be effective, deterrence needs to have a guaranteed second strike or retaliatory capability, crisis stability, and sufficient time provided for decision-making by the national leadership. Deterrence is very much alive and well today and has periodically proven that it works. In 2018 alone, it was tested twice in Syria, first when US forces attacked and killed an unidentified number of Russian private military contractors who had crossed into US-held territory; Moscow took the blow and did not respond. Then, two months later, US President Trump threatened a devastating attack against Syrian government targets in retaliation for an alleged use of chemical weapons by Bashar al-Assad's troops. Valery Gerasimov, the Russian Chief of the General Staff, warned the Americans that, should that strike hurt Russian nationals, Russia would respond against the platforms from which those strikes had been launched. Heeding that warning, the US military mounted only a token attack that left the Russians unscathed.

Deterrence is not a static condition. It requires constant stewardship. When in 2001, George W. Bush told Vladimir Putin about his decision to pull out of the ABM Treaty, Putin took this calmly, but he set out to make sure that no US ballistic defenses would blunt the power of Russian strategic offensive arms. He ordered a program that, years later, led to the development of Russian weapons

that can penetrate US defenses using high speed and unorthodox routes to their targets. After Putin claimed in the March 1, 2018 address to the Russian parliament that Russian offensive arms had been provided with a capability to penetrate any missile defenses the United States would be able to build in the next several decades, Russian political and military leaders stopped complaining about US BMDs.⁹ Absent the ABM Treaty, they have acquired something that compensated for it: an ability to cancel out the other side's advantage.

Certainly, deterrence stewardship without nuclear arms control inevitably means an arms race. This race is different from the US-Soviet one in the Cold War era—no longer a game of numbers, but a competition of rivaling capabilities. During most of the post-Cold War era, there was another major difference: nuclear arms were built and deployed with the intent to deter notional adversaries, rather than to actually fight them. Nuclear war was considered unwinnable and, thus, impossible. In more recent years, with the advent of first US-Russian and then US-Chinese confrontation, the idea of victory has been making a comeback, including in American military thought.¹⁰ The idea of using one's overwhelming conventional military advantage to win a war against another nuclear power—which would then have to choose between accepting defeat and blowing up the world—allows the conventionally stronger party to break out of the deadlock of mutual assured destruction. But the “thinkability” of previously unthinkable possibilities also carries a risk of catastrophic miscalculation: the other side may not follow the logic of its opponent.

There is another huge risk related to deterrence strategies. If a party fears a decapitating strike by its opponent—e.g., in a situation similar to the one created by the deployment of the US *Pershing* II and cruise missiles in Europe in the 1980s—that party might adopt a first-strike strategy in crisis.¹¹ In its public reaction to the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, Russia said that a re-introduction of successors to the *Pershing* IIs in Europe would make Moscow target US centers of decision-making.¹² This targeting potentially would pave the way to acquiring a first-strike decapitating capability. Should this capability happen, the relatively safe version of second-strike deterrence long adopted by both the United States and Russia would be replaced by first-strike deterrence, seeking to deny the opponent any conceivable advantage of a decapitating strike. This replacement would advance the Doomsday clock even closer to midnight.

Unlike in the Cold War period, when both antagonists based their planning on scenarios of causing “unacceptable damage” to the enemy, which was measured in dozens of millions of fatalities, a war between the United States and Russia could now result from an inadvertent collision escalating to an armed conflict that crossed the nuclear threshold. This reality lays a premium on reliable communication, availability of contacts, and reasonably good familiarization with each other in order to be confident that exchanged information is true. 24/7

communication, high-level professional contacts, and reliable knowledge about each other's doctrines, patterns of operation, and politico-military objectives and strategies should be critical in an environment where each party has to rely on its intelligence assets to assess its adversary. Both Americans and Russians seem to recognize this.

Indeed, as Russian and US forces started from 2015 to operate in the same country, Syria, while pursuing very different objectives there, the two countries' militaries established a deconfliction mechanism designed to prevent inadvertent collisions. So far, the mechanism has been working professionally, helping avoid incidents between two major nuclear powers engaged in a general confrontation with each other.¹³ (It needs to be mentioned that in the same country and in the same time period, Russian forces encountered deadly incidents with Turkish and Syrian forces, while deconfliction arrangements with Israel proved to be insufficient, resulting in the Syrian air defenses shooting down a Russian plane that was mistaken for an Israeli one). Deconfliction is an important instrument for reducing risks of an inadvertent military collision that could potentially escalate to an armed conflict.

Deconfliction attempts, of course, are nothing new in principle. Since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the Kremlin and the White House have been linked by a hot line that provided for emergency direct communication between the leaders of the two countries. What is new in the current environment is that direct communication has been expanded to include US and Russian defense ministers, top military commanders, and security chiefs. These officials not only speak with each other, but also meet in person occasionally. In a situation when official diplomatic exchanges have become sterile and non-productive, and back channels are viewed in the United States as something bordering on high treason, these professional contacts can help defuse potential conflict. This communication is something that is also sorely needed between the United States and China, given the recent intensification of both countries' military activities in the South China Sea and around Taiwan.

While professional contacts are eminently useful and form a safety net for the badly frayed US-Russia relationship, summit meetings have ceased to play the role of engines of détente and generators of personal trust that they did during the Cold War. In an atmosphere poisoned by domestic charges of President Trump's collusion with the Kremlin, meetings between him and President Putin have turned out to be counterproductive. For some time in the future, meetings between US and Russian leaders will probably yield very little in terms of de-escalating the ongoing confrontation. During this period, it will be up to the senior subordinates

The Russian and US militaries established a deconfliction mechanism in Syria

of the heads of state to stay in touch with their counterparts to prevent or contain collisions.

Against this background, Vladimir Putin's 2020 initiative of a summit meeting of the permanent members of the UN Security Council does not look particularly realistic or promising. All of Trump's contacts with Putin are looked upon with enormous suspicion by much of the US political class and the media, and the political effect of any get-together between the two amid a US presidential campaign is much more likely to be negative rather than positive. If this idea were to turn into a summit on strategic stability issues, fully appropriate for the five official nuclear powers (the "permanent five" [P5] are the same as the "nuclear five" [N5]), it would achieve nothing beyond platitudes, while being awkward for the Chinese, who are fearful of being ganged up on by the United States and its allies to join them at the negotiating table. Russia, too, would find itself in an uncomfortable position between its general attitude (any further nuclear arms cuts would only be possible if other countries joined Russia and the United States in making them) and its political position (one should not try to impose on China to join arms control treaties).

It makes much more sense to help strengthen deterrence by making it more effective such as early warning

It makes much more sense to help strengthen deterrence by making it more effective. In the environment of rising US-China tensions, Russia's agreement in 2019 to help China build its own early warning system that would alert the Chinese leadership of any incoming enemy missiles is stabilizing. When built and made operational, such a system would allow Chinese leaders to be more self-confident about their country's security and thus less prone to rash decision-making in a

crisis. Other cases where deterrence needs to be strengthened by increasing situation awareness include India-Pakistan and China-India.

It needs to be recognized that nuclear weapons do not make wars impossible between the states that possess them. Armed clashes between India and Pakistan in Kargil in 1999 and between China and India in Ladakh in 2020 did not lead to war, but neither did the presence of nuclear weapons on both sides deter belligerents in the first place. Expecting a major nuclear power to accept defeat at the hands of another one without recourse to nuclear weapons in anything more than a brief local skirmish is likely to be a fateful fallacy.

In the 21st century, any war between nuclear powers is fraught with the probability, not just a possibility, that nuclear weapons will be used by the losing side. The world is going through a period of nationalist resurgence. Against this background, some regimes would believe that, should they agree to lose rather than at

least threaten nuclear use, they would probably fall. Democratic governments in similar situations would come under tremendous pressure. The publics have lost much of the fear of war, including nuclear war, that was a constant restraining factor during the Cold War due to the combined effect of the fading memories of WWII, the unprecedented peacetime military stand-off, and the emergence of nuclear weapons which were put on a hair-trigger alert. Limited use of nuclear weapons, particularly in a faraway theater of war, would be touted as fully justified: better fight wars “over there” than “over here.”

While negotiations on new arms control agreements may be a thing of the past or—hopefully—of the future, in the meantime, discussions today on strategic stability issues in the form of seminars, presentations, briefings, and the like can generate much better understanding among adversaries of their opponents’ objectives, principles, and strategies. This understanding may not necessarily lead to mutual restraint, but it might help to reduce the dangers of misperception. Restraint, even if unilateral, is absolutely rational—anything that goes beyond what is necessary for deterrence is both useless and provocative. Strategic bomber patrols close to an opponent’s borders or surprise major exercises demonstrate capacities and capabilities, but they also contribute to escalation and might lead to accidents and incidents. Generally speaking, restraint is in short supply in today’s atmosphere of intense rivalry and multiple confrontations.

Transparency is another tool that can be very useful in today’s deregulated strategic environment. If deterrence, rather than warfighting, is the name of the game, nuclear powers are interested in demonstrating both their capacity to deter notional adversaries and their intention to keep the peace. Arms control has produced an unprecedented level of mutual transparency between the United States and Russia. While this transparency cannot be matched in the foreseeable future by other powers, particularly in the absence of arms control, a degree of transparency, even unilaterally, should help. The degree of transparency should be safe enough not to undermine deterrence.

If history is a guide, the pattern of recklessness and risk-taking between nuclear powers could be changed by a serious crisis like the US-Soviet standoff over the missiles in Cuba did during the Cold War. The Chinese and US militaries are operating in ever-closer proximity in the South China Sea. The Taiwan Strait is another potential hotspot. It does not require that the United States and China look into the abyss of a nuclear catastrophe, as the Americans and Soviets did almost 60 years ago. Beijing and Washington might decide to

Transparency is another tool that can be very useful in today’s deregulated strategic environment

anticipate adverse developments by expanding their military contacts to a sort of a deconfliction mechanism.

Such a mechanism could include several elements. One is hotlines between the national leaderships at the White House and Zhongnanhai, between military communication channels between the Pentagon and the PLA headquarters, and between the US Indo-Pacific command and regional Chinese military commanders. Two is agreements on the rules and protocols to be observed to prevent collisions between aircraft and naval ships as well as to deal with the incidents that do occur. Three is exchange of advance information about military activities, such as exercises. The menu built over the decades between the Soviet Union/Russia and the United States is rich, and its items can be adapted to the situation in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

Focus on Developing Deconfliction, Not Losing Arms Control

US-Russian arms control may yet continue in a truncated form, but it will never again be the principal companion of nuclear deterrence as it was toward the end of the Cold War. The Sino-American antagonism and the bipolarity that it is ushering in is acquiring a military—including nuclear—dimension, but even just a dialogue between Beijing and Washington on those issues, never mind any agreements, is many years away.

China and other countries—especially India and Pakistan—have become important players in a polycentric nuclear world, and even if their combined arsenal is only a fraction of the US and Russian one, the likelihood of it actually being used is no smaller. Bilateral arms control, which originated during the Cold War, is being succeeded in a polycentric world by nuclear deregulation.

We should not mourn the exit of arms control that, over a half-century, gave the world some sense of security, more psychological than real. It is nuclear deterrence that has been and remains key to strategic stability. Making it more effective is top priority. This, rather than arms control, is the only basis of strategic stability. In a polycentric and deregulated nuclear world, strategic stability can and should be complemented by reliable communication, contacts, a measure of transparency, and restraint among the relevant parties. Investing in these measures makes more sense than trying to salvage arms control or seeking to impose it on unwilling parties.

These practical additions to deterrence that already exist between the United States and Russia—and need to be developed for the United States and China; India and Pakistan; India and China; and so on—can help avoid misunderstanding, misperception, and fateful mistakes. In fact, these are the instruments that are best suited to prevent what seems to be the most likely cause of a nuclear war in the 21st century: an inadvertent collision that was allowed to escalate.

Notes

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