

SURVIVING IN A DEREGULATED STRATEGIC WORLD

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Russian-American strategic relations are entering uncharted waters with the demise of the arms control regime; rapid technological revolution; the rise of nuclear multipolarity; the asymmetry of the two countries' positions amid their growing confrontation and an increasing likelihood of military conflict among major powers; and the complete lack of trust and a glaring deficit of decency in relations between Moscow and Washington. Preventing a nuclear war between the two powers will be as hard a task as it ever was, and the environment for that immensely more complex and fluid than ever.

Deterrence as the only pillar of stability

Russia's nuclear doctrine, like the U.S. one, is based on the strategy of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear deterrence, in turn, is rooted in the concept of mutually assured destruction. To make deterrence credible, one has to have a realistic capability of absorbing the enemy's first massive nuclear attack, and still of destroying him as a functioning entity in the second strike. This is assured by launching one's missiles once a certified warning is received that the enemy has launched a massive attack. Thus, the party that fired first would assuredly die second. Knowing that, neither party would initiate an attack, and peace would be preserved. As the U.S. and Soviet presidents agreed in a 1990 joint statement, "Nuclear war cannot be won, and should not be fought".

A credible strategy of deterrence needs to deal with a range of challenges.

Ballistic missile defenses, offering a promise of intercepting a certain proportion of incoming missiles, by definition, undermine deterrence. For three decades, ballistic missile defenses (BMD) were constrained by the ABM Treaty, which Moscow considered to be a cornerstone of strategic stability. After the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty in 2002, Russia embarked on a program designed to nullify any advantages the United States would get through implementing its missile defense programs. Thus, the BMD challenge to deterrence was – and still is being – met by improving the capacity of one's missile fleet to penetrate enemy defenses and deliver their payloads to targets.

At this moment, the Russian leadership feels assured that its strategic arsenal will be capable of overwhelming any missile defenses the United States would be able to deploy for several more decades.

The enemy's decapitating strikes from close range, whether from advantageous geographical positions or outer space, carry the risk of eliminating one's national command and control centers before they can issue orders to activate a nuclear response. To meet this challenge, command and control centers are hardened to withstand any conceivable attack. Other potential counter-measures, both laden with heightened risk, include placing the adversary in a similarly vulnerable geographical position by moving one's attack assets within close range of his key centers and bases, or by adopting a first strike deterrence posture which sends the message to the adversary that, in a crisis, one would have to launch a nuclear attack first, in order not to be annihilated by the enemy. As President Vladimir Putin put it in an interview with a U.S. TV station, "We don't need a world without Russia".

Other technological challenges include the use of artificial intelligence and particularly of cyberattacks to paralyze nuclear command and control systems. The importance of cyber defenses has risen sharply in the last decades. Efforts are being made to make sure that nuclear communications remain immune from cyber penetration.

Political challenges look more serious. A massive nuclear attack which was the basis of strategic thinking in the second half of the 20th century is growing less and less likely. This undermines the stabilizing function of nuclear deterrence because the threat it once sought to prevent is moving. Indeed, Russia itself, in the hour of its military weakness and domestic political disarray in the 1990s announced that it would use nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack if such an attack would put the existence of the Russian state in jeopardy.

Prior to that, Russia rejected the idea of limited nuclear war and did not engage in thinking too much about the ladder of nuclear escalation. Under conditions of the mid-to-late 20th century, such a war would have been likely fought in Europe, including the European portion of the Soviet Union, and would spare the United States. Moscow was never going to give Washington such an advantage and said that, once the nuclear Pandora's box was opened, limiting war would be impossible. This was certainly part of the deterrence strategy.

Now, with the specter of a nuclear holocaust receding very far, and the confrontation between the United States and Russia rising to the point when their military platforms or units can actually collide in various parts of the world; and when the United States and Russia are involved in armed conflicts on different sides and are operating in close proximity to each other, like in Syria; when frozen conflicts can unfreeze and escalate (think Donbas), preventing war between Russia and America has become perhaps the only real issue on the otherwise de fact barren U.S.-Russian agenda. It is thus vitally important to understand what Moscow and Washington are up to.

In the nuclear area, both Russians and Americans are concerned that their adversary will use nuclear weapons first at the tactical level, to seal one's conventional success and make the other side accept defeat. Underlying this is a belief (which appears to be a fateful illusion, more present among American scholars and experts) that war and achieving victory in it have again become possible, with the stakes much lower than during the Cold War, and the prospect of total annihilation itself is enough to deter the weaker party, Russia, from using its nuclear weapons on a massive scale. This is the principal danger these days.

Misperceptions – or lack of clear understanding – between the two exist not so much regarding their nuclear doctrines but with respect to their broader foreign policy strategies. Absolute lack of trust and high levels of mutual suspicion complicate strategic assessment.

Strategic stability in a multipolar nuclear environment

Strategic stability as defined in the decades of the Cold War was narrowly focused on relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. The countries with the largest nuclear arsenals and military establishments were also the two principal antagonists in the competition not so much for state primacy but for world ideological and socio-political hegemony. With the end of the Cold War, this is all over. Russia and the United States still possess the world's largest by far nuclear weapons arsenals, but their relationship is no longer the main axis of world politics. The United States continues to be a superpower, but Russia is now a power of a different caliber with no ambition to prevail in the world.

America's main challenger now is China, which has surpassed it in terms of GDP in PPP terms and is expected to surpass it in nominal USD terms soon. China is also challenging America's technological primacy and offers a model of governance that has been able to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic much more effectively than the United States. Yet, China's nuclear arsenal is small compared to American and has a very different structure. Unlike the Soviet Union in the 1970s, China has no desire to engage in arms control at this stage, believing (correctly) this to be to America's unilateral advantage. Such a situation creates a mismatch: U.S.'s strategic relations are better developed with Russia, which is no longer America's principal strategic rival, and are very thin with China, which is.

Besides the geopolitical downgrading of Russia which is not reflected in a comparable decrease in its nuclear capabilities, and the steep economic/technological rise of China, not accompanied on the same scale by the growth of its nuclear forces, there are other powers who have joined the nuclear weapons states club as independent players. The United Kingdom and France, which developed their weapons in the 1950s and 1960s, have always been U.S. allies within NATO, and their weapons were always considered by Moscow to be part of the Western bloc's combined nuclear arsenal. Cold War-era nuclear bipolarity that coincided with a similar ideological and geopolitical division (China remained largely introverted during that period) transformed into multipolarity. Strategic stability ceased being an issue for Moscow and Washington exclusively to tackle.

When India and Pakistan both acquired nuclear weapons at the turn of the 21st century, this materially changed the previous situation. Delhi and Islamabad are in no need to coordinate their policies and strategies with others. Ever since independence and partition, the two countries have maintained tense relations, leading to full-scale wars and border conflicts. Armed with nuclear weapons and delivery

means and sharing a long border, they now got the ability to start the world's first nuclear war. What is also important to note here is the strategic asymmetry: while Pakistan trains its weapons on India, India sees China as its main strategic rival, and Pakistan, China's friend, as an adversary. Maintaining strategic stability between India and Pakistan through arms control on the U.S.-Soviet model was impossible due to geographical proximity and territorial issues, the general power imbalance between the two countries, and the asymmetrical strategic position of India and Pakistan.

North Korea, which developed its nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in the 21st century, presented another problem. Its arrival as a nuclear-armed state sent the message that any country whose leadership was determined to go nuclear and was prepared to withstand serious international pressure was able to achieve its goal, provided it stayed the course. The North Korean regime learned one thing about nuclear deterrence: all you need to do to deter the world's most powerful country from attacking you and toppling your regime is to make it unsure about wiping out completely your nuclear arsenal or intercepting every nuclear-tipped missile that you launch against it. Pyongyang's example essentially demonstrates that any country anywhere can effectively deter any conceivable opponent with relatively crude weapons and missiles.

During the Cold War, strategic stability used to be essentially about high-yield nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. In the 21st century, strategic non-nuclear systems have achieved a degree of precision that allows them to do the job that in the earlier era could only be assigned to nuclear systems.

With the U.S.-Soviet confrontation no longer the only major military concern, the so-called tactical weapons – both nuclear and non-nuclear – have acquired salience. These are certainly the ones that are pointed in opposite directions on the Indian Sub-Continent; they also form the bulk of the Chinese nuclear arsenal and missile fleet. Assuring stability within that class of weapons is exceedingly more difficult than with strategic weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles. The United States and the Soviet Union never managed to control their tactical weapons – which, it was true, was less important then.

Guardrails and communications instead of treaties

Formal arms control treaties are becoming a thing of the past. Developing a new U.S.-Russian treaty to succeed New START will be extremely difficult, given the complexity of the issues involved, and the poisonous climate prevailing in the United States attitudes toward Russia. Negotiating agreements in a multipolar nuclear environment appears next to impossible. Even a trilateral U.S.-Russian-Chinese understanding – realistic in principle, given that they are currently the world's top three military and geopolitical players by far – appears very long in coming.

Given this situation, strengthening strategic stability requires strengthening deterrence in the sense of eliminating all hopes of a victory in a nuclear war.

No new technological developments should be allowed to create an illusion of achieving victory in a war between nuclear powers. There should also be no illusion of a nuclear power defeating a nuclear opponent using only conventional means of warfare.

A military collision between the United States and Russia in the 21st century can be the result of incidents between military units or platforms – such as aircraft, ships – operating in close proximity to one another; local or regional conflicts escalating and drawing in Moscow and Washington on opposite sides; misperceptions about the actions of the other side, such as surprise exercises, and the like. In all these and similar cases, preventing military conflict between Russia and America requires the flawless operation of communications channels between the military and security authorities of the two countries. Such communication, on the model of the deconfliction mechanism that has been in place in Syria since 2015, would help clarify the situation, prevent escalation and avoid misperception or misunderstanding.

However, a complete lack of trust between the U.S. and Russian governments makes mutual suspicion irreducible. In a serious crisis, communication per se will not fully satisfy either party. Messages passed along communications channels can be perceived as disinformation. Much more value will be placed on one's own intelligence assets, from the national technical means of reconnaissance and intelligence gathering to human sources. Interpretation of that information will be of crucial, even vital importance. Technical or human error and political and other considerations leading to misrepresentation can lead to disaster.

There can be various confidence-building measures. Under the START I Treaty, Moscow and Washington agreed to establish Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers. Such centers were ready to become operational in the early 2000s. However, the project fell through due to technical problems. A variation of that idea could be useful under the present circumstances of new hostility between the two countries. Yet, before this happens, a modicum of decency needs to be restored in the U.S.-Russian relations. Decency will not bring trust, but it can instill an element of mutual respect and self-respect to the relationship which is painfully lacking now. Without this, the only basis for strategic stability between Russia and the United States will remain fear of nuclear war.

Mutual fear may be as good a deterrent as any. It worked, after all, during the Cold War. The problem is that, in a relationship as highly asymmetrical as the present U.S.-Russian one, the two countries can stumble into a nuclear first use, and then a nuclear exchange, through the thick fog of mutual misperceptions borne out of U.S. arrogance, Russian resentment, reciprocal hostility, and utter disrespect.

Avoiding collision in uncharted waters

Even if New START is extended, the United States and Russia will have bought only a short reprieve. Five years – if this is the timeframe of the extension – will hardly be enough for negotiating a new treaty. So, extension or no extension, the 50-year-long era of arms control between Moscow and Washington is drawing to a close. From now on, deterrence will not only be the principal basis of strategic stability but its only basis.

True to its core philosophical assumptions, political goals, and doctrinal objectives, the United States will continue to strive for strategic superiority over Russia and China. For its part, Russia will seek to protect its nuclear deterrence capability vis-à-vis America. The nuclear arms race is already on. This is not a game of numbers of weapons but rather of their capabilities. President Putin, in his 2018 annual address to the Federal Assembly, laid out what measures had been taken by Russia in response to the 2002 U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. Further modernization efforts will continue on both sides.

Strategic decisions by either party that change force postures can lead to changes to the other party's doctrines. The U.S. withdrawal in 2019 from the INF Treaty has opened the way to the development and deployment of a new generation of INF systems in both Asia and Europe. If such U.S. systems are deployed in Japan and South Korea, this would put China's key centers of decision-making and strategic assets at high risk, as well as cover much of the Russian Far East and Siberia. Russia would certainly respond with its own deployments, modifying its force posture accordingly. If, by contrast, U.S. INF missiles are deployed to Europe (e.g., Poland) from where they can quickly reach Moscow and all targets in European Russia, this would place Russia in ultimate danger. There will certainly be changes to Russia's own force posture. However, Russia might logically have to go farther and adopt a first-strike deterrence strategy in order to pre-empt a decapitating U.S. attack against itself. Having escaped nuclear war when U.S.-Soviet antagonism was absolute, the two countries might thus put the world's existence at risk out of sheer contempt for each other.

This dangerous outcome needs to be prevented. Deconflicting and communications are vitally important, confidence building, such as the resurrection of nuclear risk reduction centers might help, but without a meaningful improvement in Russian-U.S. political relations to the level of serious dialogue on security issues between the two governments, the situation will continue to deteriorate. Right now, U.S.-Russia relations are clouded in a toxic fog, which makes avoiding kinetic collision between them much more difficult. It looks that the Biden Administration, while supporting New START extension and arms control in general, is going to take a hard line toward the Kremlin, aiming to squeeze Russia even more than its predecessor. Moscow is bracing for a new round of confrontation. Tough times are lying ahead.