

S – Strategic Stability

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The concept of strategic stability appeared in the Russian foreign policy vocabulary in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the relevant concept was adopted. The Russian approach had a number of distinctive features that became apparent as early as the 1990s. After the collapse of the USSR, maintaining strategic stability became a matter of national and international security for Moscow, which sought not only to prevent nuclear war and an arms race, but also retain the international political status of a great power.

During the Cold War, the U.S. conceptualized relations with the Soviet Union in the field of nuclear weapons by using such concepts as ‘crisis stability,’ ‘first strike stability’ and ‘arms race stability.’ But the Soviet Union had no open nuclear deterrence theories until the late 1980s.

The concept of strategic stability came into being when the acute Cold War-era confrontation had already fizzled out, but the USSR and the bipolar international system continued to exist, and the two superpowers still had enormous nuclear arsenals. This concept combines ‘first strike stability/crisis stability’ with ‘arms race stability’ and is intended to emphasize the desire of the parties to address issues of strategic deterrence positively, through cooperation.

The concept was first mentioned in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty signed in 1987 in Washington by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan. It was further elaborated in the “Joint Statement on Future Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Arms and Further Enhancing Strategic Stability” (June 1990). This document states that the aim of the negotiations is *“to reduce further the risk of outbreak of war, particularly nuclear war, and to ensure strategic stability, transparency and predictability through further stabilizing reductions in the strategic arsenals of both countries. This will be achieved by seeking agreements that improve survivability, remove incentives for a nuclear first strike and implement an appropriate relationship between strategic offenses and defenses.”*

In other words, strategic stability was a bilateral Russian-American concept, which concerned only strategic nuclear weapons and included both the principles of developing the nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States and relations between them.

Just like ‘first strike stability/crisis stability,’ ‘strategic stability’ meant maintaining the nuclear arsenals of the two countries and U.S.-Russia relations in such a state that would not give either side any incentives for a nuclear first strike. This implied, first, that both sides had a credible second-strike capability sufficient to cause unavoidable and unacceptable damage, which means mutual nuclear deterrence. Second, it implied that neither side would have weapons that were most dangerous in terms of nuclear escalation. At that time, these were missile defense systems and intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles, which could indeed have created a temptation to launch a disarming (in the case of missile defense) or preemptive (in the case of INF) strike. Third, this implied transparency and predictability, which would make the parties relatively confident that the threat of an unexpected nuclear strike was minimal and that the other side did not explicitly seek strategic superiority. This was ensured through constant U.S.-Russia arms control dialogue, as well as monitoring and verification of arms limitation and reduction obligations.

Common objectives for Moscow and Washington in strengthening strategic stability (through exercising bilateral nuclear arms control and maintaining reliable retaliatory capabilities) were reducing the threat of

nuclear war, limiting the arms race, gradually downsizing nuclear arsenals in general, and strengthening bilateral political relations.

This understanding provided a conceptual basis for negotiations on START-1 (signed in July 1991) and established a close link between strategic stability and arms control. The view that arms control was the only reliable way to ensure strategic stability prevailed. From that moment on, these two concepts were perceived as synonyms.

However, the collapse of the USSR shortly after the signing of START-1 and the dramatic decline of Russia's international role necessitated significant adjustments in its approach to strategic stability. Moscow began viewing it and relevant interaction with Washington as a way to ensure not only security, but also its great power status.

This became manifest first and foremost in Russia's commitment to approximate quantitative parity with America in the field of strategic nuclear forces and mutual assured destruction the way it was construed in the "mature" Cold War period despite the end of the Cold War and dramatic changes in the international positions of Russia and the United States. The original concept of strategic stability does not insist on parity and the ability of the parties to wipe each other off the face of the earth. It refers to deterrence which is understood as the ability to maintain the potential for an inescapable retaliatory strike that would inflict assuredly unacceptable damage upon the aggressor, which may not necessarily be achieved through parity. For example, there is not even the slightest hint of parity in the deterrence posture (so-called minimum deterrence) Washington and Beijing have assumed with regard to each other.

However, throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, Russia consistently viewed any deviation from parity and the mutual assured destruction concept as a threat to strategic stability and its own military security. Even during the most dramatic economic and financial turmoil of the 1990s, Moscow always made sure that its strategic nuclear arsenals were approximately equal to America's and that all of the subsequent U.S.-Russia treaties on the limitation and reduction of strategic nuclear weapons envisaged nuclear parity and did not allow either party to obtain quantitative superiority.

Russia also strongly criticized the United States for its plans to create a limited strategic missile defense system. It was the ABM factor that buried

START-2. Immediately after Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty (and Russia's secession from START-2), Moscow started building weapons capable of overcoming any future missile defense systems, including the latest heavy liquid-fueled ICBMs and hypersonic nuclear weapon delivery vehicles.

Naturally, the initial understanding of strategic stability also regarded missile defense systems as destabilizing, pointing to "the connection between strategic offensive and defensive weapons." But the prevailing view in the Russian expert community, let alone the American one, is that no missile defense systems that the U.S. can hypothetically create in the foreseeable future, much less those created by the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, can challenge Russia's potential for retaliation. Moreover, the existence of an advanced missile attack warning system means that in real life there will be no counterattack in a nuclear war but a retaliatory strike launched under attack, which no missile defense can physically minimize.

The reason for Russia's tough stance is that it viewed the creation by the United States of a missile defense system not just as a factor that impairs deterrence, but as a threat to strategic parity and mutual assured destruction in the classical sense.

Another example of Russia's commitment to parity and the mutual assured destruction concept is its reluctance to make further cuts in strategic nuclear forces after START-3 "without taking into account all factors affecting strategic stability," as the official position stated. In fact, by the early 2010s, the United States had gone far ahead of Russia in terms of missile defense and precision non-nuclear weapons which began to be seen as impairing strategic deterrence. Some argued that the distinction between nuclear and precision conventional weapons in terms of their ability to deliver a disarming strike was disappearing. So Russia started insisting on their limitation as a condition for further reduction of strategic nuclear arsenals.

Again, theoretically, the Russian approach fully matches the initial understanding of strategic stability. However, in real life precision non-nuclear weapons could hardly destroy any significant part of strategic nuclear forces, especially in the early 2010s. Russia sought not so much to

maintain deterrence as such, but to prevent a general military imbalance with the United States as the latter moved ahead in the development of non-nuclear weapons.

Finally, another proof of Russia's commitment to the mutual assured destruction concept and its desire to prevent a general military imbalance with the United States and NATO is the growing importance of nuclear weapons in its military doctrine after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is borne out by Russia's rejection of the Soviet principle of non-first use of nuclear weapons (Russia's current nuclear doctrine allows the use of nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack "if the very existence of the state is threatened") and by the increasingly growing role of tactical nuclear weapons, which are viewed as a way to make up for NATO's superiority in non-nuclear capabilities. This is why Moscow strongly opposes Washington's attempts to expand arms control, limitations and restricting rules to tactical nuclear weapons.

The main reason for Russia's commitment to strategic nuclear parity and mutual assured destruction is purely political. After the collapse of the USSR these were the only areas where Moscow matched the United States and by far exceeded all other centers of power, including China, and therefore they became the most important indicators of Russia's status as a great power. References to the special responsibility of Russia and the United States, as countries with more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear arsenals, for global security is one of Moscow's favorite topics in foreign policy rhetoric.

Russia's perception of nuclear superpower status as almost the main framework of its great powerness has determined its attitude to arms control. Moscow considered it not only as a mechanism to reduce the threat of nuclear war and limit the arms race, but also as an important way to emphasize and institutionalize its status as a unique partner of the United States in managing strategic stability, as a power entrusted with the great mission of ensuring peace and security on the planet.

This was clearly evident, *firstly*, in Russia's desire to continue the U.S.-Russia arms control process uninterrupted and to avoid gaps in the operation of treaties like START-1 despite U.S. regular attempts to bring this process to an end. In fact, after Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and premature termination of START-2, Moscow exerted

considerable efforts to convince the Bush administration, which claimed that arms control had become irrelevant, to prevent its complete collapse. The result was the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. It did not seem to be as profound as START-1 and START-2, but still it was a legally binding instrument that preserved the format of bilateral cooperation between Russia and the United States in the field of arms control. Moscow is making similar efforts today in a bid to persuade the Trump administration to extend START-3.

Secondly, the ceremonial signing of “big” treaties with Americans was often viewed as recognition of Russia’s president personally as a world leader—some sort of international legitimization. In many ways, it was the status that prompted Moscow to sign START-2 with the United States even before START-1 entered into force. Boris Yeltsin did not want to look less important as a world leader than Mikhail Gorbachev who had signed START-1.

Thirdly, Moscow is very sensitive to the Trump administration’s calls to include China in arms control negotiations as this will cause Russia to lose its status as an exclusive U.S. partner on strategic stability issues. The reason for the negative attitude towards this idea is not only that it can hardly be implemented because of Beijing’s unwillingness to play along until Moscow and Washington cut their nuclear arsenals to its level, and not only because it generally looks like an attempt to find justification for the non-renewal of the bilateral Russian-American START-3 treaty for a new term. Bringing China into this process will eliminate the last area of global politics where Moscow is obviously more important and influential than Beijing is. That is why Russia continues to encourage the Trump administration to extend START-3 until 2026 and use this time to develop new or correct previous approaches to maintaining strategic stability.

The world has been changing so dramatically lately that even the Russian approach to strategic stability, characteristic of the period after the collapse of the USSR, and its understanding adopted in 1990 are rapidly becoming obsolete. As non-nuclear weapons acquire strategic properties and the line between war and peace becomes increasingly vague, the very nature of the threat of nuclear war is changing fundamentally: its outbreak becomes much more likely due to the escalation of a non-nuclear conflict

than to an unexpected nuclear attack. The rapid diversification of means that can inflict strategic damage, which today include cyber technologies, is changing the nature of the arms race and making further strategic nuclear arms limitations and reductions in their traditional sense technically impossible and militarily pointless.

All this breaks the link, which seemed quite solid in 1990, between strategic stability and arms control in the form of a system of agreements and regimes designed to reduce and limit strategic nuclear forces. The latter can no longer reliably minimize the threat of nuclear war. They are also losing their critical influence on the arms race which is now unfolding in other domains that have acquired a strategic character. The nuclear arms race becomes senseless from the military point of view due to the invention of hypersonic delivery vehicles that can inflict unacceptable damage upon the aggressor regardless of the number of its strategic nuclear weapons or missile defense systems. And the treaties themselves are slowly dying out.

The diversification of strategic weapons makes maintaining quantitative parity with the United States in nuclear strategic forces impossible and even more meaningless as a means of deterrence. Even the latest Russian hypersonic systems are a step away from parity and an excuse to give it up at the political and doctrinal level.

The U.S. confrontation with China, which has every chance of dominating international relations in the coming decades, coupled with the improvement of China's strategic forces are putting an end to the bilateral U.S.-Russia character of strategic stability. China's economic and technological resources allow it to make a leap if such a need arises, and catch up with Russia and the United States in terms of strategic nuclear forces by the 2030s. As Vladimir Putin said in October 2019, Russia is already helping modernize China's missile warning system, thus solidifying the possibility of mutual assured destruction between the United States and China.

The world has come to the point where it needs to fill the concept of strategic stability with new substance and create new instruments for ensuring it. The discussion on these issues has already begun in Russia.