

What Factors Affect Strategic Stability?

Russian Experts' Assessments

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Abstract

The article analyzes the data obtained in a survey that involved twenty leading Russian experts specializing in international security, arms control,

and strategic stability. The survey was conducted in December 2021. The respondents were asked to name factors that, in their opinion, currently have (2022) or will have a tangible impact on strategic stability in the foreseeable future (until 2036) and to list them in the order of their significance. In addition, they were asked whether and how these factors would be taken into account in the future. Two time frames were chosen for analysis: up until the year 2026 (when the “extended” START-3 Treaty will end) and up until the year 2036 (when a possible nuclear arms control agreement that may replace START-3 will expire). The experts were also asked to assess the degree to which the proposed factors may affect strategic stability in 2022, 2026, and 2036.

Keywords: strategic stability, space weapons, missile defense, precision weapons, non-strategic nuclear weapons, third-country nuclear weapons, cyber weapons, growing conflict intensity between leading world powers, Russia, U.S., China, NATO.

The strategic stability concept was created in the United States after it had become absolutely clear that a nuclear war between the USSR and the U.S. would inevitably lead to their complete destruction. This concept is based on the nuclear deterrence policy, which was also devised in the United States at the dawn of the nuclear era and designed to show the U.S. ability to deliver a crushing nuclear strike in the event of a possible adversary’s aggression against America or its allies. But as the strategic arsenals of the two sides equalized, it became absolutely clear that each of them was capable of inflicting unacceptable damage on each other even after absorbing a counter-force attack. Therefore, nuclear war becomes senseless as it will inevitably end in complete destruction of the warring parties.

At first, the Soviet Union and the United States (and then Russia and the U.S.) agreed, informally and later in official nuclear arms control agreements, to maintain the situation of “mutual destruction,” which essentially served as a basis for the strategic stability concept. In June 1990, the sides reached a common understanding of this term. They defined strategic stability as the balance of strategic nuclear forces that rules out incentives for any party to launch a nuclear first strike.

The parties did not specify what exactly they meant by such incentives. Nevertheless, based on the overall context of the nuclear deterrence concept, most experts concluded that it could be the acquisition by one side of the ability to launch a disarming first strike.

The set of factors that could influence strategic stability in its initial interpretation was quite limited: it implied only those of them that affect the ability to deliver a first strike and a retaliatory strike. Apart from quantitative and qualitative characteristics of strategic offensive weapons, such factors also include missile defense, antisubmarine defense, and air defense. The Soviet Union and the United States officially recognized the special influence of missile defense on strategic stability and in 1972 concluded an open-ended ABM Treaty, thereby sharply limiting the negative impact of this factor.

As new weapons appeared, including more effective non-nuclear ones, many experts began to say that the new systems could have a serious impact on strategic stability as well. They include strategic non-nuclear systems, precision weapons, primarily non-nuclear global strike weapons, space weapons (if any), and others.

Simultaneously, the term ‘strategic stability’ itself began to be interpreted more broadly. As a result, in many cases, strategic stability became almost synonymous with security, and the range of factors that can affect strategic stability in this interpretation has expanded dramatically. This process is characteristic not only of Russia, but also of the United States and other Western countries. As for China, the term ‘strategic stability’ is not used at all, at least in official rhetoric.

Such a “broad” approach did not negate the original interpretation of the term ‘strategic stability’ based on the nuclear deterrence concept. As before, this term is used by the professional community when negotiating and evaluating agreements on strategic nuclear weapons, with its almost identical understanding by all parties involved, primarily Russia and the United States.

From our point of view, the “broad” understanding of strategic stability should mean the “sustainability of political-military relations” between both states and their associations. It is difficult to say why the term ‘strategic stability’ came into use instead. Apparently, it turned

out to be so handy and attractive that its use in relation to the political and military situation in various areas and regions of the world was considered quite justified not only by Russian, but also by many Western politicians and experts.

Our survey did not seek to find out what interpretation of strategic stability prevails in the Russian expert community, and what point of view each of the interviewed experts holds. We consider that it is much more important to identify the factors that affect strategic stability at present and will affect it in the foreseeable future, as well as ways to strengthen security and stability in any of the above interpretations.

METHODS AND COMPOSITION OF THE EXPERT GROUP

Expert surveys use various, often unique, methods. Some of them are created exclusively for a specific case study. Nevertheless, there are some universal guiding principles. This particular survey used an integrated approach, which, in our opinion, proved most effective.

A special questionnaire was drawn up for this survey and sent to each expert individually. The experts did not know who else was participating in the survey or how many people were to be polled. The questionnaire contained questions that each expert had to answer in consecutive order. It also provided sample tables. The survey mainly took place in absentia, but some of the experts were interviewed in person. Their questionnaires were filled in during the interview which was conducted using the standard method. The multi-stage (Delphic) method was not used.

Experts were selected individually on the basis of open information about their qualifications and authority. The group included leading Russian specialists, with many years' professional experience in the international security field. The initial plan was that twenty-four experts would take part in the survey, but four of them could not participate for various reasons. The survey was conducted on condition of anonymity, and no names of the experts will appear in this article. However, we must say that the majority of the experts involved have academic degrees (five hold doctoral and thirteen candidate degrees). At least a third of the twenty experts have

practical experience in conducting official arms control negotiations, and have worked in various Soviet and Russian military and civilian bodies (Foreign or Defense Ministry). In particular, four of them have the military rank of general. During the survey, the experts gave detailed answers to the questions asked, which allows the authors to make a number of generalizations and conclusions that sufficiently reflect the views of a significant part of the Russian military-political elite on one of the most pressing security issues, that is, the need to strengthen strategic stability.

It should be emphasized that Russian experts were invited to participate in the survey regardless of their political views. The selection was based on their professional experience, authority in academic, military, and political circles in Russia and abroad, and a high level of their expertise. With this regard we believe that the conclusions and recommendations presented in this work generally reflect the opinion of the Russian professional expert community on important security and strategic stability issues.

FACTORS AFFECTING STRATEGIC STABILITY

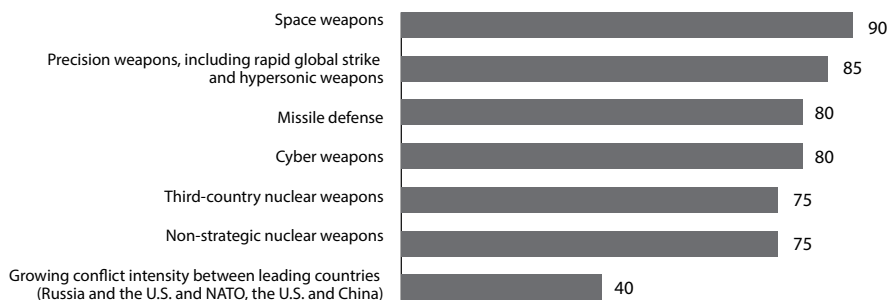
According to the results of the survey, experts identified twenty different factors which they believe affect strategic stability at present or will affect it in the future. In fact, more such factors were named, but we combined answers that looked similar in order to systematize the data. For example, the “High-precision weapons group” also included “rapid global strike weapons” and “hypersonic weapons,” and the Ukraine factor was incorporated into the “Growing conflict intensity between leading world powers” group.

During the survey, each of the experts (with only one exception) named three to ten factors that, in his opinion, affect strategic stability. At the same time, the majority cited from six to seven such factors. In total, nineteen out of twenty experts named 127 factors, which in most cases were identical in different answers. Only one respondent believes that there will be no threats to strategic stability in the foreseeable future, and there are no factors that can motivate countries to use nuclear weapons. At the same time, he thinks that the risk of the use of

nuclear weapons remains, but solely due to a combination of accidental events and technical failures.

Most often the factor of space weapons was mentioned (90% of experts). Precision weapons (including rapid global strike and hypersonic weapons) rank second with 85%. They are followed by missile defense (ABM) and cyber weapons (both factors were mentioned by 80% of respondents), third-country nuclear weapons (75%), and non-strategic nuclear weapons (75%). The remaining factors were named by less than half of the experts polled. According to 40% of the survey respondents, the most significant of them are various interpretations of growing conflict intensity between leading countries, primarily Russia and the U.S. and NATO, the U.S. and China, and the West and the East (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Factors affecting strategic stability (% of experts polled)



The above picture will be incomplete unless we consider the experts' responses in terms of the importance of each factor. Space weapons top the list. Nine out of eighteen experts who included this factor in the list named their major impact on strategic stability. Two experts put space weapons in second place, three in fourth place, one in fifth place, and three in sixth place.

Only one expert named precision weapons as the main factor affecting strategic stability. Three experts put this factor in second place, seven in fourth place, four in fifth place, and two in eighth place. None of the experts considered missile defense to be the

main factor influencing strategic stability. Only one respondent put missile defense in second place, three in third place, eight in fifth place, three in sixth place, and one in ninth place. Only one expert mentioned antisubmarine defense (third place), and no one named air defense.

Two experts ranked cyber weapons third—the highest position in this group. Three experts put this factor in fourth place, one in fifth, eight in sixth, and two in seventh place. Only one expert named third-country nuclear weapons as the main factor affecting strategic stability. Nine respondents ranked them second, one put them in third place, one in fourth place, one in fifth place, and as many put them in seventh and eighth places. Non-strategic nuclear weapons received two first places, one second place, seven third places, four fourth places, and one seventh place.

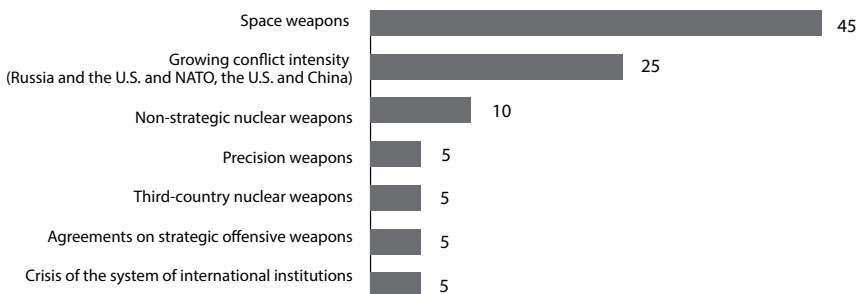
Growing conflict intensity between leading world powers was noted as the main factor affecting strategic stability by four experts. One expert put this factor in second place, and one gave it third place. The Ukraine conflict received one first place and one third place.

Our preliminary conclusion is that, in terms of quantitative indicators, space weapons are the most important factor that, according to leading Russian experts, affects strategic stability. This factor ranks first both in terms of the total number of references and the number of answers that put it at the top of the list. The quantitative distribution of the other positions does not clearly indicate the importance of the other factors mentioned by the experts. In this case, everything depends on the chosen evaluation methods.

For example, judging by the total number of references (as mentioned above), high-precision weapons should be followed by space weapons, then missile defense and cyber weapons, third-country nuclear weapons and non-strategic nuclear weapons. But if the list of factors is drawn up according to the ranking by the degree of importance (the number of first places), then the picture will change quite dramatically (Fig. 2). Space weapons will remain in first place (nine first places), but the second position will be occupied by growing conflict intensity between leading

world powers (five first places). They are followed by non-strategic nuclear weapons (two first places), and four other factors, each holding one first place (third-country nuclear weapons, precision weapons, agreements on strategic offensive weapons, the crisis of the system of international institutions). At the same time, missile defense and cyber weapons, which were never put at the top, fall out of the first part of the list.

Fig. 2. Main factors affecting strategic stability (% of experts ranking them first)



We considered that further specification in determining key factors among those that have the greatest impact on strategic stability, for example, by ranking them according to the average position assigned to them by the experts, would be redundant and even misleading. This would distort the overall picture, since the least often mentioned factors but holding top positions would have an advantage. Therefore, in this case more informative will be analyzing the received results qualitatively by examining these factors in terms of their impact on strategic stability as assessed by Russian experts.

THE IMPACT OF INDIVIDUAL FACTORS ON STRATEGIC STABILITY

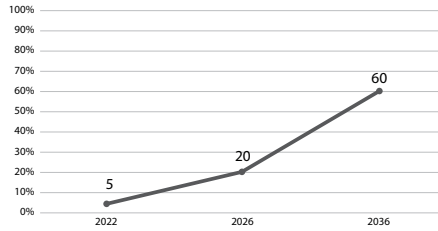
As mentioned above, the experts assessed how the factors they named will impact strategic stability in 2022, 2026, and 2036. The summary data based on their responses are given in Table 1 and Graphs showing the dynamics of each factor's impact on strategic stability.

What Factors Affect Strategic Stability?

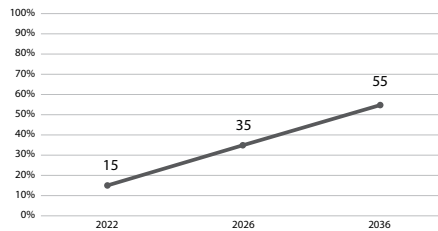
Table 1. Impact of individual factors on strategic stability in 2022, 2026, and 2036, %

| Factor/Year | 2022 | 2026 | 2036 |
|---|------|------|------|
| Space weapons | 5 | 20 | 60 |
| Precision weapons, including rapid global strike and hypersonic weapons | 15 | 35 | 55 |
| Missile defense | 0 | 5 | 20 |
| Cyber weapons | 5 | 20 | 55 |
| Third-country nuclear weapons | 10 | 35 | 60 |
| Non-strategic nuclear weapons | 20 | 20 | 35 |
| Growing conflict intensity between leading countries (Russia-NATO and U.S., U.S.-China) | 40 | 30 | 20 |

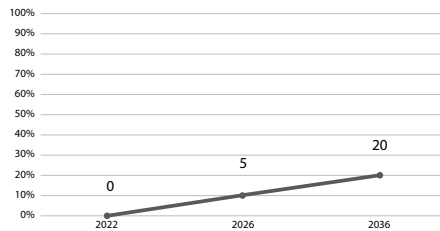
Graph 1. Space weapons, %



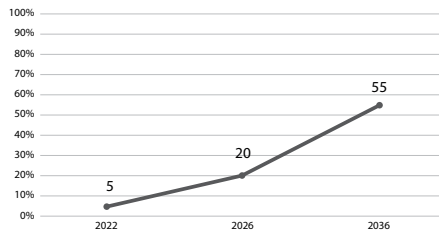
Graph 2. Precision weapons, %



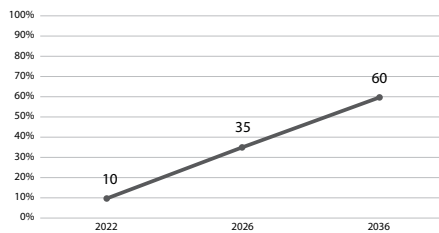
Graph 3. Missile defense, %



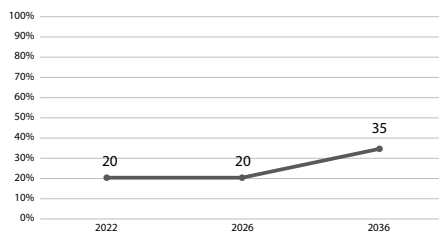
Graph 4. Cyber weapons, %



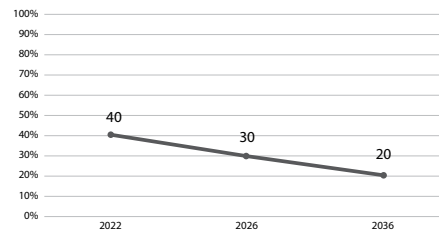
Graph 5. Third-country nuclear weapons, %



Graph 6. Non-strategic nuclear weapons, %



Graph 7. Growing conflict intensity between leading countries (Russia-NATO and U.S., U.S.-China), %



Let us consider each year separately.

2022. The results of the survey show that the growing conflict intensity between leading world powers has the greatest impact on strategic stability at present. This impact was assessed as “significant” by all six

experts who included it in their lists, regardless of its place in them. If we add up the factor of Ukraine (mentioned by two experts who marked it as “significant influence”), we will see that almost half of the experts name these factors as having the main impact on strategic stability.

Against this background, the factors that topped the lists in the quantitative analysis have noticeably lost their positions. For example, second place is held by non-strategic nuclear weapons, whose impact on strategic stability was assessed as “significant” by four experts.

Three experts assessed the influence of precision weapons as significant. These are followed by third-country nuclear weapons (two), space weapons (one), cyber weapons (one), and missile defense, the impact of which on strategic stability was not regarded as significant by any of the experts polled.

The impact of strategic offensive weapons, including START treaties, on strategic stability was assessed as significant by all three experts who mentioned this factor.

2026. By 2026, several factors can significantly increase their influence on strategic stability, thus moving up to the top of the list and pushing growing conflict intensity to third place. This is, first of all, precision weapons, the influence of which this year was considered significant by seven experts. The same can be said of third-country nuclear weapons (assessed as significant by seven experts).

Russian experts expect the impact of growing conflict intensity between leading world powers on strategic stability to slightly decrease. And yet it will most likely remain a major factor. Five experts assessed its impact as significant. One expert expects the Ukraine factor to continue to have a significant impact on stability.

Experts noted that the influence of other factors on strategic stability will increase by 2026. These include non-strategic nuclear weapons, space weapons, cyber weapons (four experts considered the effect of each factor significant). The impact of missile defense will also slightly increase (one expert).

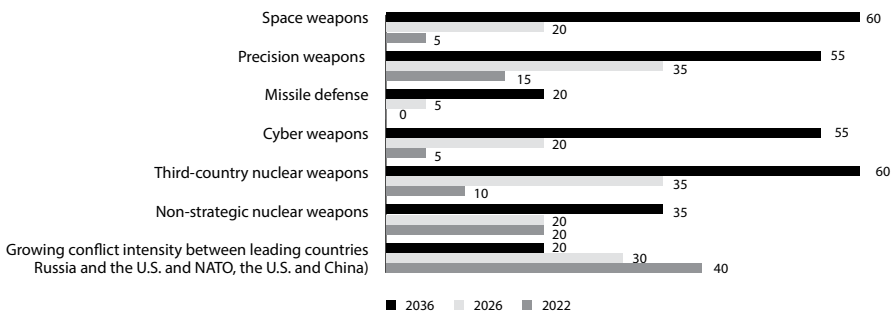
2036. Russian experts expect the list of the most significant factors in terms of strategic stability to change considerably by 2036. For example, space weapons and third-country nuclear weapons are

expected to move up to the top of the list (twelve respondents identified it as significant). Precision weapons, which will somewhat lose their leading position since 2026, and cyber weapons will come close to them (eleven answers each).

This is followed by non-strategic nuclear weapons (seven responses). Least of all, strategic stability will be affected by missile defense and growing conflict intensity between leading world powers (four responses each). It should be noted that the fact that growing conflict intensity moves down does not mean that its impact will decrease substantially. This relocation is solely due to the fact that this factor was named by a smaller number of experts than the others. The impact of growing conflict intensity is assessed mainly as significant throughout the projected period (with the exception of the Ukraine factor, which may lose its significance or even disappear from the list of these factors in 2026).¹

Fig. 3 shows the change expected by experts in the share of individual factors in the stated years in terms of their “significant” impact on strategic stability.

Fig. 3. Assessment of “significant” impact of factors on strategic stability



As can be seen from Fig. 3, Russian experts believe that by 2036, the main factors affecting strategic stability (except for growing conflict intensity between leading world powers) can become much more significant. All this raises the question of how these factors can be taken into account in order to neutralize their negative impact on security.

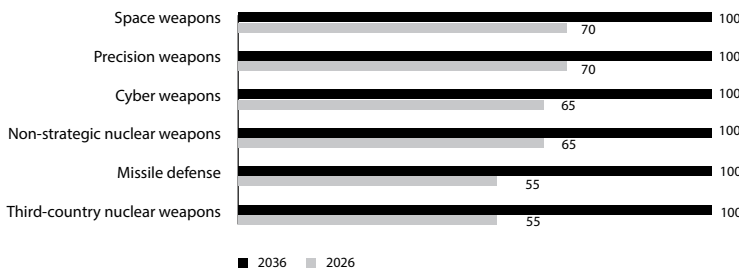
¹ Note that the survey was conducted at the end of 2021—*Ed.*

NECESSARY MEASURES TO ADDRESS FACTORS AFFECTING STRATEGIC STABILITY

All Russian experts noted that the factors they named as affecting strategic stability should be addressed one way or another by 2036 (see Fig. 4). As for 2026, some experts believe that by that time some factors may be ignored due to their small influence on stability. Space weapons (70% of respondents say they need to be factored in) and precision weapons (also supported by 70% of experts) top this list. They are followed by non-strategic nuclear weapons and cyber weapons (65% of the experts insisted that both factors will have to be taken into account). Finally, missile defense and third-country nuclear weapons come third (55% of respondents believe that these factors must be taken into consideration in 2026).

The experts offered their views on how and in what form the above factors affecting strategic stability should be dealt with in the future. These proposals include a wide range of measures and initiatives for each of the factors named. At the same time, only one of 113 recommendations implies a military-technical response to the actions of other countries, which, in the opinion of this expert, can weaken or even undermine strategic stability.

Fig. 4. The need to address these factors in agreements by 2026 and 2036, % of experts' responses



THIRD-COUNTRY NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Summing up the experts' proposals, we can note the following. It is important to achieve mutual understanding, primarily between Russia and the United States, on the nuclear arsenals of third countries.

The key to solving this problem may be a trilateral dialogue between Russia, the United States, and China, with possible engagement of the other nuclear powers. It should be preceded by increased informal contacts between representatives of these countries, including through international seminars, discussions, other forums, joint projects, etc. To this end, the experts suggest using existing platforms and mechanisms for such contacts, in particular those that have been established and operate within the framework of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Ultimately, all efforts should be directed if not towards drafting a multilateral treaty between the five nuclear powers (although some experts suggest such an option), then definitely towards ensuring transparency and predictability in this area. Some experts consider it important to develop a “code of conduct” in the field of nuclear weapons, and persuade individual countries to assume unilateral obligations not to increase their nuclear arsenals.

MISSILE DEFENSE

None of the experts insisted on the restoration of severe ABM restrictions provided for in the 1972 Treaty. In rare cases, a “light” version of this treaty was proposed, with partial restrictions on certain ABM parameters. Some experts believe that the missile defense issue can be addressed through a trilateral U.S.-Russian-Chinese dialogue as the sides move forward in discussing their nuclear arsenals. Some experts insist on linking strategic offensive arms cuts to defensive systems. Others suggest fixing such interdependence in a future START treaty (START-4), as was done in START-3.

Many experts believe it is important to develop confidence-building and predictability measures in the area of strategic defense, as well as voluntary unilateral measures of restraint in implementing relevant programs. Among direct prohibitions, experts named the advisability of reaching an agreement on the non-deployment of missile defense systems and their components in space.

In general, according to leading Russian experts, missile defense is not among major factors that affect strategic stability. Nevertheless,

they believe that it should be addressed, but not under agreements imposing harsh restrictions, but rather on the basis of better mutual understanding, greater predictability, and self-restraint.

PRECISION WEAPONS, RAPID GLOBAL STRIKE SYSTEMS, HYPERSONIC WEAPONS

As mentioned above, in order to systematize the information received from the experts polled, three categories of weapons were combined into one group. In fact, only one out of twenty experts put non-nuclear rapid global strike systems and hypersonic weapons in separate categories. Therefore, the recommendations below will apply to all three arms groups combined under the name “precision weapons.”

A large part of the experts interviewed proposed to conclude agreements on certain categories of these weapons. Some believe that it would be possible to draw up a treaty covering certain categories of precision weapons. Another solution is to incorporate precision weapons capable of carrying nuclear weapons into a new START-4.

Some experts think that coordinating separate protocols, declarations and joint understandings without drafting a special treaty would be enough. This should be accompanied by increased confidence-building and transparency measures, as well as unilateral steps to address concerns about specific aspects of the introduction, deployment, and operation of precision weapons.

Only one expert suggested expanding the strategic partnership between Russia and China in this area, meaning particularly joint creation of the latest weapons for asymmetric deterrence of the United States and its NATO partners.

SPACE WEAPONS

Since space weapons as such do not exist yet and their control will be quite difficult (most likely, these will be dual purpose weapons), many experts did not insist on harsh restrictions in this area. The majority of experts believe that the most effective way to ensure security in this area would be agreeing on a “code of conduct” in space. Unilateral

actions and commitments by states actively exploring outer space could also play a positive role.

Some of the experts insisted that the countries concerned should consider working out a legally binding agreement that would drastically restrict (prohibit) both the deployment of weapons in space and their use against space systems. This implies, first of all, a complete ban on anti-satellite weapons.

Experts believe that the development of a mechanism for implementing the proposed measures should begin with a series of consultations between Russia and the United States, to be joined later on by other space powers, primarily China. Some experts suggest starting such consultations immediately in a tripartite or even multilateral format.

NON-STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS

As is well known, the United States has proposed to address the issue of non-strategic nuclear weapons in future agreements. Some of the experts shared this view, suggesting that not only strategic offensive weapons but also all nuclear systems should be put under control by a single agreement (START-4). Some experts believe that intermediate-range nuclear weapons should be taken out of such a general agreement and addressed in a separate document, similar to the INF Treaty. Some proposed holding relevant negotiations among Russia, the U.S. and China.

Some experts draw attention to the difficulty of non-strategic nuclear arms verification. Detailed negotiations on this issue should be preceded by consultations with the United States on monitoring and transparency in this area. The conclusion of separate monitoring agreements, both with the United States and with other nuclear powers, is not excluded. The view expressed by experts is that such agreements will be enough to neutralize the negative impact of non-strategic nuclear weapons on strategic stability in the foreseeable future.

Some experts suggested addressing this issue step by step, specifying that the focus should be on nuclear warheads, not on weapons in general. Some experts believe that the resolution of the issue of non-

strategic nuclear weapons should be linked to further progress in limiting and reducing strategic offensive weapons. Others proposed to develop separate agreements on the two categories of nuclear weapons regardless of each other.

CYBER WEAPONS

As with space weapons, some experts suggested working out a code of conduct in cyberspace. Most experts believe that the impact of cyber weapons on strategic stability should be discussed and resolved through dialogue. At the same time, almost no one mentioned the idea of a legally binding agreement in this area, except maybe on certain issues, particularly the inadmissibility of cyberattacks on military command and control systems and critical infrastructure. They also suggested developing international cooperation to investigate such cases.

Russia, the U.S., and NATO were named as “priority” participants in such a dialogue. Some experts believe that the initial dialogue could be limited just to Russia and the United States. None of the experts polled named China explicitly.

Only one expert expressed the opinion that the problem of cyber weapons does not have a solution at all. The majority believes that unilateral obligations can help strengthen strategic stability. In particular, the parties concerned should pledge to refrain from intervening and targeting key systems that ensure strategic stability, including space-based elements of communications and command and control systems of the strategic nuclear forces and the early warning systems.

OTHER FACTORS AFFECTING STRATEGIC STABILITY

As noted above, *growing conflict intensity between leading world powers* stands first among the factors that received less than half of the votes from the experts surveyed. Experts suggested solving this problem by restoring dialogue between Russia and the United States, and between Russia and NATO. They believe that such a dialogue should lead to the conclusion of bilateral and/or multilateral legal agreements on security assurances, especially in Europe. Active

work of the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers, the development of confidence-building measures, and arms control can play a role in this process.

Some experts pointed to the ***“strategic ‘infantilism’ of political elites and their lack of understanding of the importance of strategic stability.”*** To solve this problem, experts proposed to initiate an international campaign with the active participation of scientists to explain the real consequences of nuclear irresponsibility, including all aspects of the use of nuclear weapons.

Many of the interviewed experts believe that arms control can also play a positive role in solving ***the problem of new strategic weapons***, and other problems directly related to nuclear and conventional arms. In the latter case, these concern the ***imbalance in conventional weapons*** and, in general, ***conventional triggers of nuclear escalation***.

* * *

The above analysis of the results of the survey among leading Russian experts concerning factors that affect strategic stability showed that the expert community is both united and divided over a number of critical security issues.

In our view, there is no unity on the substance of the very concept of strategic stability. Although no such question was asked, the results of the survey clearly indicate that its participants have different approaches to the issue.

The lack of unity among the Russian experts on this issue was vividly expressed by the fact that they named more than twenty factors affecting strategic stability. We believe this clearly indicates the urgent need to intensify the discussion on the specific content of the notion of strategic stability, which is already actively used by Russian and Western politicians and experts, even though it is understood differently.

Such differences would have been expected to affect the experts' approaches to ways and methods of strengthening strategic stability, including the weakening or neutralization of factors that adversely affect stability. But it is precisely this area where the experts were quite unanimous.

They were unanimous in saying that problems associated with the negative influence of various factors on strategic stability can be resolved through negotiations. There were practically no proposals concerning “retaliatory,” “asymmetric” or other unilateral military-technical measures. The Russian experts suggested strengthening existing and creating new channels of official and unofficial contacts with the United States and other Western countries in order to jointly find solutions to vital security problems and avoid an arms race in “traditional” and new areas of military activity. In their opinion, efforts to increase mutual understanding, and ensure openness, transparency, and predictability in the military field should facilitate this process.

In conclusion, we should note that the proposals put forth by the Russian experts cannot be implemented without reciprocity from the West. Contacts between Russia and Western countries, both official (diplomats, the military) and unofficial (scientists, experts), have shrunk significantly in recent years. This can hardly contribute to better understanding between countries and progress in strengthening security and strategic stability, which all international actors are presumably interested in.