



STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

By Celeste A. Wallander

Mutually Assured Stability: Establishing US-Russia Security Relations for a New Century

The Obama administration's goals for arms control and security cooperation with Russia are the right ones, but they cannot be achieved as long as US-Russian strategic stability is in question. Unless leaders in both capitals confront the new requirements for strategic stability in the twenty-first century, they will fail to seize the opportunity for further arms reductions and enhanced national security.

In the twentieth century, the two superpowers sustained strategic stability through their respective strategies of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). MAD facilitated a minimal but robust strategic stability that sustained the two antagonists through the Cold War and transformation of the international system in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Though the logic of strategic stability may be timeless, the right strategy to achieve it is not. Given the development of new military technologies that may create fears of preemption, the emergence of Eurasia¹ as the locus of new security threats and sources of destabilization, and the still-unfolding transformation in the bilateral security relationship decisively away from confrontation, MAD is neither adequate nor cost-effective for sustaining strategic stability between Russia and the United States. The right strategy for the twenty-first century is instead a Mutually Assured Stability, a condition in which neither party has the intention or capability to exercise unilateral advantage

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¹ Eurasia is defined as the single continental geopolitical space including the regions of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

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for political or military exploitation through preemptive coercion or military strike in such a way that precludes response, negotiation, or compromise.

Strategic Stability in the Twentieth Century

Coping with the destabilizing incentives to strike first has long played a central role in conflict and security. Thucydides relates that in the crucial debate that launched the Peloponnesian War, the Spartan king counseled caution and patience, but his argument lost to the call for a preemptive strike against Athens to gain strategic advantage. In modern times, the outbreak of World War I is a searing lesson on how competitive arms races and offensive doctrines requiring lightning first strikes drove countries to disastrous total war in Europe. In case after historical case, even political leaderships with defensive intentions have been driven to preemptive strategic military doctrines when they became convinced that vulnerability to a disabling first strike demands preemption.

Thus, the challenge of strategic stability is tied neither to nuclear weapons per se nor to the US-Russia bilateral relationship. It is inherent in every political-military relationship, as long as states in the international system have the sovereign right to self-defense and whenever technology and capabilities create advantages to offensive preemption. However, key features of security and military technology in the mid-twentieth century did combine to exacerbate the instability that arises from strategic offensive military in the US-Soviet relationship.

First, nuclear weapons technology and strategic air power (long-range bombers and long-range ballistic missiles) transformed the logic of defense and deterrence. The ability to destroy a country was not new: what was new was the ability to do so quickly on a huge scale and without having to engage—let alone defeat—the target’s military forces. This should make deterrence easier to achieve (because the threat to cause unacceptable damage was more credible), thus reducing the risk of conflict.

However, while the cost component of the strategic nuclear deterrent calculation pointed toward stability,

the destructiveness of nuclear weapons combined with the speed of delivery exponentially magnified the advantages of preemption and the vulnerabilities of delay. Early in the Cold War, American strategists and military planners became aware that nuclear weapons and prompt methods of delivering them had combined to create an unprecedented danger: vulnerable nuclear weapons increased the incentives to launch preemptive offensive strikes. Remember that the key logic of offensive preemption is that if conflict is inevitable and if acting first accords an overwhelming advantage by allowing the preempting to eliminate the target’s ability to fight on, then offensive preemption makes defensive sense.

Nuclear weapons exacerbate this logic in two ways. First, by increasing the destructive powers of a military strike, nuclear weapons increase the chances that the target’s forces will be destroyed, rendering it incapable of retaliation or response. Second, by increasing the destructive power of any possible retaliation or response, nuclear weapons themselves become a more urgent target for destruction.

Long-range bombers and ballistic missiles were key to the danger as well. The potential overwhelming advantage of a preemptive offensive attack also arises from its promptness—the speed with which the attack can be effected, such that the target is destroyed before it can respond. Imagine a twentieth century without aircraft or ballistic missiles, but with nuclear weapons: it is not a happy world, but it is not as dangerous a world. Delivering a preemptive offensive nuclear strike by tank just is not going to cut it. Therefore, key American strategists in the 1950s realized that the vulnerability of nuclear weapons to prompt strategic strikes increased the danger of war by creating powerful incentives for preemption. Schooled in studies of the causes of World War I, strategists highlighted the urgency of reducing the vulnerability of nuclear weapons to mitigate the danger.²

There was a key political feature of the security and strategic landscape in the twentieth century that was

2 For an excellent analysis, see Michael S. Gerson, “The Origins of Strategic Stability: The United States and the Threat of Surprise Attack” in *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations*, edited by Elbridge A. Colby and Michale S. Gerson (Carlisle Barracks PA: US Army War College Press).

also essential to both the problem and ultimately the solution: US-Soviet rivalry and their zero-sum security relationship. Nuclear weapons and prompt delivery technology created the potential that the United States and Soviet Union each *could* gain advantage in a preemptive offensive first strike, but it was their competing and largely incompatible security doctrines that meant each assumed (not without reason) that the other *would* do so if given the opportunity. The logic of preemptive first strike is but a background problem unless activated by a competitive or mistrustful political security relationship that leads the countries involved to fear that the other is preparing to attack first, thus requiring offensive preemption. If the political security relationship between the parties is cooperative, compatible, and not plagued by mistrust, there is no reason to fear being attacked first, and thus no reason to activate a preemptive doctrine. To put it another way, no one worries about strategic stability between the United States and United Kingdom. The danger and challenge of strategic instability during the Cold War was rooted in military technology *and* the political realities of the US-Soviet security relationship. We tend to overlook this in focusing on the purely military means for transforming preemptive instability into strategic stability, but this insight is vital to understanding strategic stability in the twenty-first century.

At this point, it is useful to clarify the definition of strategic stability as it emerged in the twentieth century as a result of these political-military conditions. The definition of strategic stability came to be: a condition in which neither the Soviet Union nor the United States believed that it could gain decisive advantage through preemptive first attack, and thus would not seek to strike first. Under conditions of strategic stability, both parties retained the option of response, and it is the preservation of response options regardless of the capabilities or intentions of the other party that creates stability. Because of the sharply competitive nature of their bilateral political-security relationship and because of the reality of the bipolar global system, the United States and Soviet Union focused primarily on the capabilities of the other for a disarming first strike, assuming that each would seek such as advantage if it were possible.

Sustaining strategic stability therefore required ensuring that neither believed that both it and its adversary were vulnerable to such a disarming preemptive attack. In the event that one was to strike first, the target would survive with sufficient strategic nuclear capability to retaliate. Neither would have a first strike capability, and both would have a second strike retaliatory capability. Stability would be ensured through the logic of MAD, which eliminates any incentives to launch a preemptive offensive attack. With both deterred by the likelihood that both would be destroyed and the attacker could not gain from preemption, strategic stability would be maintained. It was not a great way to maintain national security, but it was preferable to a nuclear World War I.

The logic of MAD as the condition preserving strategic stability in turn required that while each country must remain vulnerable to a retaliatory nuclear attack by the other, their nuclear weapons and strategic delivery vehicles would not be vulnerable to a preemptive offensive attack. Weapons and their delivery systems would need to be invulnerable in aggregate (that is, while some might be destroyed in a first strike, substantial numbers would survive and be available for retaliation).

And in the counterintuitive logic of strategic stability during the twentieth century, national invulnerability would be destabilizing because it would negate the other country's retaliatory capability. The US and Soviet Union therefore agreed to limit strategic defensive systems in order to preserve mutual retaliatory capability. Enshrined in the Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, the stabilizing effect of mutual vulnerability became integral to US-Soviet arms control in the twentieth century. Since the United States and Soviet Union were overwhelmingly concerned about security relative to one another, adopting a counterintuitive defense strategy that relied on not deploying strategic defenses made sense.

Strategic Stability in the Twenty-first Century

The Military Encyclopedia of the Russian Ministry of Defense defines strategic stability as a condition in which neither party believes that it can gain decisive advantage through pre-emptive first strike, and thus

does not seek to strike first. Furthermore, it declares that military-strategic stability is nested within the broader conditions of military-political stability.³

This conception of strategic stability is thus broader than the common American understanding, which focuses on maintenance of retaliatory offensive nuclear forces.⁴ The Russian military conception is compatible with the analysis developed above, which places strategic stability in historic context and highlights the particular military-technological and political conditions of the twentieth century that shaped reliance upon Mutually Assured Destruction as the vehicle for sustaining strategic stability.

For the most part, American and Russian officials (and analysts) have been talking past one another because of these different conceptions. Neither side has fully grasped the challenge of the transformation in conditions affecting how strategic stability can be sustained, however. The Russian conception is correct in recognizing that the key issue in strategic stability is managing incentives to attempt preemptive first strike, and that changes in military technology in the twenty-first century may change the requirements for preventing the extremes of offensive advantage. However, the Russian conception neglects the importance of political change and the transformation of global security relations. For its part, the United States has neglected to take seriously how transformations in military technology have altered the logic of MAD as a sufficient and reliable instrument for strategic stability.

If we return to the key conditions that create the problem (a preemptive first strike in pursuit of decisive advantage when conflict is assessed to be inevitable), we immediately see that Russian analysts make a strong case that exclusive focus on offensive strategic nuclear weapons is missing the danger. Recall that there were two technological aspects to the heightened danger of the preemptive temptation in the twentieth century: the scale of destructive power of the weapons

and the promptness of the strike, creating a situation in which a country could be destroyed without its defense forces first being defeated.

Even if military planners do not intend such effects developments in technology and policy are trending toward this potential. The destructive power and precision of conventional weapons is apparent in the use of these weapons in Iraq, and those technologies are already ten years old. If developed, the use of cyber weapons have the potential to achieve a disarming first strike which effectively defeats a country even before it even knows that it faces war. New technologies such as directed energy weapons could have the destructive effect of nuclear weapons with greater precision on leadership facilities, weapons systems, and defense infrastructure.

In addition to magnified destructiveness, technology trends potentially facilitate the “promptness” element, incentivizing the temptation to launch a preemptive first strike. The ability to operate in the space and cyber domains is comparable to the qualitative jump in promptness of delivery vehicles the United States and Soviet Union built in the twentieth century. A military attack from space or over the Internet would be nearly instantaneous compared with even the most advanced long-range aircraft or ballistic missiles.

And of course, in the counterintuitive logic at the heart of strategic nuclear deterrence, advances in missile defense technologies potentially feed advantages to preemptive offensive strategies. The foundation of strategic stability is the confidence that there is no advantage in preemptive first attack, and that, even if attacked, a country will be able to retaliate. Perfect defenses negate this condition, but even imperfect defenses might undermine it by tilting advantages and thus incentives toward a prompt, destructive first strike.

One response to these trends toward preemptive capacity threatening to undermine strategic stability could be to renew the common bilateral commitment to ensuring MAD. This appears to be the inspiration behind the official Russian government position, with its focus on limiting missile defenses, conventional

³ *Voyennaya entsiklopediya*, entry on “Stabil’nost’,” pages 633-634.

⁴ See the discussion in “O kachestvennoi transformatsii Rossiisko-Amerikanskikh otnoshenii v strategicheskoi oblasti,” Working Paper of the Russian International Affairs Council, (Moscow: Institute of the USA and Canada, 2013), especially pages 9-10.

weapons mounted on strategic missiles, utilization of space, and related new technologies. It also is in some sense the instinct behind US policy, which largely views strategic stability as a robust reality. American officials are confident in the secure strategic nuclear retaliatory capability of both Russia and the United States, and therefore do not see a basis for concern.

The problem with the US position, however, is that Russia is *not* confident that the conditions for strategic stability are met, and therefore they are not. Since strategic stability is a condition in which both parties are confident that each retains a secure retaliatory capability, if either is not confident, the equation is at risk. To put it another way, it does not help in a crisis if the United States is confident that no military strike could put Russia's ability to retaliate at risk if Russia believes that it would have to preempt for survival. Because Russian analysis takes this seriously, US policy needs to take this seriously.

While Russian thinking seems to be more attuned to the implications of military technological change for strategic stability, it seems to be oblivious to the changed political security conditions of the twenty-first century in which strategic stability is nested. Most importantly, Russian policy assumes a level of confrontation and hostile intent in the US-Russia relationship that is simply not there. Russia simply is not the focus of US security policy, and US policy toward Russia is not driven by the goal of containing, weakening, or dismantling it.

Responsible leaderships in both countries must plan for defense, of course. The changed quality of the political relationship, however, means that the presumption of military confrontation should be lower, and a single-minded focus on MAD as the only basis on which to achieve strategic stability is misguided and counterproductive. That is, MAD was acceptable when it addressed the primary security threat each faced, and accepting its disadvantages was worth the price. Now that new security challenges take precedence, MAD may not be adequate for sustaining strategic stability.

The real-world effects of the security priority shift is at the heart of the US-Russia disconnect on missile defense. Iran and North Korea loom much larger than Russia as nuclear threats to the United States, and in neither case is the bilateral security relationship based on preserving Mutually Assured Destruction (and thus vulnerability to retaliation). US security policy requires the capacity to defend against provocation and attack in the cases of North Korea and Iran. In asking the US to forego this capability, Russia is ignoring how US defense and military is being driven by new global security conditions and realities.

It is not unreasonable that Russians tend to see US presence and capabilities through a Russia-focused lens, but given the increasing importance of Asia in global security and what will likely be decades of political and security change in the Middle East, this disconnect must be addressed for strategic stability between the United States and Russia to be sustained. Russia has vital security interests in the peaceful development of its neighbors throughout Eurasia to reverse the growth and reach of violent extremism. Framed in these terms, the United States has substantially the same interests. Strategic stability between the United States and Russia in the twenty-first century will be embedded in their ability to work on common ground in Eurasian security, as well as coping with potential destabilizing effects of emerging military technologies.

Defining Mutually Assured Stability as the Means to Achieve Strategic Stability in the Twenty-first Century

If strategic stability is a condition in which neither Russia nor the United States believe that one could gain decisive advantage through preemption, thus preserving response options and reassurance that neither will be able unilaterally to impose an outcome on the other, then a strategy for sustaining strategic stability in the twenty-first century must be political as well as military. Assured retaliation must remain as part of the strategy, because it is ultimately essential to preventing incentives toward—or fear of—preemption. But the definition must acknowledge non-nuclear means that can impose massively destructive effects, including advanced conventional weapons and cyber

technologies. It must include modern and evolving prompt delivery means, including submarines, cruise missiles, cyber, and space as well as traditional ballistic missiles and long-range aircraft. To the extent that proximity exacerbates “prompt” capacity and thus the potential for preemption, it should include discussion of deployments and patrols as well as weapons technologies themselves.

Since stability must be based upon confidence that political preemption, coercion, and unilateral advantage do not convey an advantage, a fully developed strategy would also include mechanisms to create time, space, and incentives for political response to crises, negotiation, and compromise. For a negative example of what happens when these conditions are not met, one only has to recall the Russia-Georgia conflict of August 2008 and the strike-counterstrike incentives that brought that crisis to war.

With this in mind, a workable definition consistent with the positive lessons of the past century and the new conditions emerging for the future would be:

Mutually Assured Stability: a condition in which neither party has the intention or capability to exercise unilateral advantage for political or military exploitation through preemptive coercion or military strike in such a way that precludes response, negotiation, or compromise.

Mutually Assured Stability thus encompasses strategic stability, as it was developed in the twentieth century as the minimum requirement for national security in the most challenging conditions, but is more ambitious both because it has to be, and because it can be. It has to be more ambitious because of the development of new military technologies and the multiplication of complex security challenges in Eurasia that risk igniting competitive elements in the bilateral relationship.

It also is more ambitious because it can be: Russia and the United States have many more mechanisms available for negotiating limits on technologies, numbers, deployments, and employment of potentially

destabilizing weapons. They have positive experience with workable transparency supplements to arms control limitation approaches, such as the Open Skies Treaty. Russia and the United States now have experience with exchanges on military operations (such as in Afghanistan), observing exercises, and exchanging information on military doctrine and planning. Numerical limitations should not be ruled out, and reductions in nuclear weapons consistent with stability must be part of the strategy. But simple approaches to limitations that worked during the twentieth century may not address how new systems or emerging technologies can create fears of preemptive incentives, so policymakers must evaluate process, engagement, and transparency mechanisms as potentially more effective policies for today’s realities.

In short, Russia and the United States can still count on security through their own capabilities and actions (ultimately, retaliation and deterrence), but can reinforce the strategy to include robust agreements for gaining concrete mutual assurance on military capabilities, technologies, and planning. Strategy stability was sustained in the twentieth century, but it was costly and dangerous. Mutually Assured Stability offers the opportunity to ensure it is not only sustained, but made robust and resilient in the face of the security challenges Russia and the United States face in the twenty-first century.

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