



Real and Imagined Challenges to Strategic Stability

Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director, Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS)

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Author:

Bruno Tertrais, Deputy Director,
Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS)

Editors:

Paul van Hoof and Tim Sweijts

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1. Strategic Stability In The Narrow Sense

The origins of the concept of strategic stability are to be found in the context of the Cold War. It generally referred to a situation where neither of the two adversaries had an incentive to escalate (crisis stability), nor strike first (first strike stability) nor to gain a significant advantage in terms of nuclear capability (arms race stability).

The Cold War is no lost paradise in this regard. There is little evidence that the United States and Russia truly endorsed the logic of “Mutual Assured Destruction”.¹ Both circumvented the spirit of the treaties by developing Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) and cruise missiles, and accumulating thousands of theater nuclear weapons. And the Soviet Union was widely suspected of significant violations.² So, what are the current challenges to strategic stability?

The military and political environment has dramatically changed in the past thirty years. It has become more complex if only because of the increase in the number of major strategic actors – including three new nuclear actors – the maturation of missile defense, and the expansion of the strategic battlefield to cyber space and outer space.

Russia is diversifying its arsenal. Four other nuclear countries – China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea – are also increasing and diversifying their arsenals. The latter three have yet to reach the point that they consider being the appropriate level of ‘minimum deterrence’. China, for its part, seems to hedge against future US developments, and at worst is considering becoming a fully-fledged major nuclear power.

Yet, one should not hype up the problems we face.

Nuclear doctrines remain focused on deterrence and the nuclear threshold is not being lowered. This includes Russia, despite the view held by the US 2018 Nuclear Posture Review.³ By emphasizing non-nuclear and strategic deterrence, raising its stated nuclear threshold, and by embracing the expression ‘unacceptable damage’, Moscow has signaled what could be called a normalization of its nuclear deterrence policy. The Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence are, in their essence, close to those underlying current Western doctrines.⁴

Is there really an arms race? One should be cautious about using such an expression. Yes, action-reaction dynamics do exist, but what is happening now should be put into perspective. First, because we are far from the massive accumulation of weapons that happened during the Cold War, it's more of an arms crawl than an arms race. Second, because it's qualitative

1 Bruno Tertrais, “The Philosopher and the Practitioner,” *Inference* 5, no. 1 (December 12, 2019), <https://inference-review.com/letter/the-philosopher-and-the-practitioner>.

2 Christopher A Ford, “Russian Arms Control Compliance: A Report Card, 1984-2020,” *Arms Control and International Security Papers* 1, no. 10 (June 18, 2020), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/T-Series-Paper-Comp-Rpt-History-FINAL-T-508.pdf>.

3 See: Bruno Tertrais, “Russia’s Nuclear Policy: Worrying for the Wrong Reasons,” *Survival* 60, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 33–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1448560>.

4 Vladimir Putin, “Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, June 2, 2020), https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rpOfiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094.

The Cold War is no lost paradise in this regard

more than quantitative. Third, because it is lopsided: Russia and China are in the game more than the US.

Is the rapid evolution of technology a major problem for strategic stability? Let us not get carried away.

- Let us start with what is not new: the dual capability of platforms. This was already a feature of the Cold war – most Soviet theater missiles were dual capable. Can a strategic conventional missile launch trigger a nuclear war for fear that it could be a nuclear strike? I very much doubt that. The idea that a country would push the button without ascertaining the nature of the strike sounds far-fetched to me.
- Cyber weapons attacks do not trigger the launch of nuclear weapons – protection and redundancies should ensure that unintended nuclear war is a very, very low risk.
- Artificial intelligence cuts both ways: it could help with the location of adverse forces and make them more vulnerable, but it also helps proliferation surveillance, arms control monitoring. And I doubt very much that it will be a game-changer for the security of second-strike capabilities.
- Hypersonic speed is already part of strategic life – warheads launched from strategic missiles go back to earth at extreme speed. Hypersonic cruise missiles and glide vehicles, maneuverable warheads will indeed reduce the time available for reaction and increase the uncertainty about target location. But they could also enhance strategic stability by making sure that missile defense can be penetrated.

Exotic systems such as those developed by Russia and now China (the 2021 orbital test) do raise questions. But it remains to be seen whether or not they will be developed in significant quantities. I believe that they are more technology demonstrators and “hedging” measures than game-changers.

In fact, technology throughout history has been rather neutral overall – neither favoring the attacker nor the defender, neither favoring stability nor instability in general. Conventional forces can make forces more vulnerable, but they can also raise the nuclear threshold. Exquisite accuracy can improve targeting but also lead to a reduction of forces. Missile defense can protect the defender but also the attacker. Sensors, big data analysis can help both detection and surveillance (for arms control and non-proliferation), but also targeting.

As per the reduction of warning time (hypersonic systems) and unpredictability of flights (maneuverable warheads, guided missiles, exotic launch systems...), a few seconds do not change the calculations of leaders. And the history of the past sixty years tends to show that they tend to be cautious and need clear-cut evidence that a nuclear strike is on the way before pressing the button.

My bottom line regarding strategic stability in the traditional sense of the term is that as long as Heads of states and governments remain cautious about the very idea of using nuclear weapons – and I believe they are – current developments will not significantly increase the risk of nuclear war.

Finally, the rapid development of sea-based nuclear capabilities in Asia could, in the long run, be a more stabilizing than destabilizing factor.

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2. Strategic Stability In The Broader Sense

A broader definition of strategic stability enlarges its scope to non-nuclear issues and emphasizes the absence of incentives for major aggression, the clarity of intents and predictability of behavior, the respect for sovereignty and absence of interference in domestic affairs.

Overall, as this author and two colleagues defined it in a 2020 publication, it refers to “a situation in which the incentives to change the status quo are weaker than the disincentives to do so.”⁵ It is thus much broader than just nuclear arms control and includes, in particular, risk reduction. Such a conception is attractive to us Europeans. It should be noted that the Russian discourse too emphasizes such a broad conception.⁶ It is thus more a political than a military problem – one which promotes predictability, clarity, and peaceful neighborhood relations.

I will focus here on the Russia dimension, which is of the greatest interest for us Europeans.

Russia’s actions

Russia’s actions undermining strategic stability could be described as strategic ambiguity and strategic pressure.

Promoting strategic ambiguity

Unpredictability is the product of Russian decisions to violate or withdraw from a number of political and legal bilateral or multilateral commitments.

Opacity is another key feature of Russia’s actions. ‘Frozen’ conflicts leave entire regions in international limbo. ‘Unsigned’ actions using mercenaries, anonymous cyber-intrusions and cyberattacks, as well as aggressions against opponents leave governments guessing how much the Kremlin directly supports such actions. The dual capability of Russian bombers and missiles is deliberately exploited to put the West off balance. Dual-capability of missiles is a traditional feature inherited from Soviet times, but Moscow seems to relish in Western concerns and interrogations regarding the exact nature (nuclear or not) of its deployments and employment during exercises: keeping the West uncertain about its capabilities and intentions is seen as beneficial to deterrence⁷

Exercising strategic pressure

A related set of Russian actions involve various means of pressure against both its immediate neighbors and Western countries. (1) *Intervening* in Russia’s neighborhood, to gain influence, prevent the exercise of full sovereignty on those states’ territories and the normalization of their relations with the West. (2) *Deliberately sow division and discord* in Europe and the Atlantic Alliance through the dissemination of fake news and disinformation, as well as the publicity of populist and nationalist forces in order to influence the democratic process. (3) *Impress and instill fear* through

5 Benjamin Hautecouverture, Emmanuelle Maitre, and Bruno Tertrais, “The Future of Strategic Stability” (Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, March 2021), 2, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/recherches-et-documents/future-strategic-stability-2021>.

6 Hautecouverture, Maitre, and Tertrais.

7 Tertrais, “Russia’s Nuclear Policy.”

Strategic stability refers to “a situation in which the incentives to change the status quo are weaker than the disincentives to do so”

cyberattacks, maneuvers and exercises, nuclear signaling, the violation of national air and maritime spaces, as well as provocations at sea and in the airs, sometimes resulting in close calls. While the development of new, exotic strategic weapons systems has many rationales, the publicity given by these systems clearly includes the will to impress foreign governments and opinions.⁸

3. What To Do?

Strategic arms control: difficult and insufficient

The continuation of the bilateral process after New Start expires (in 2026) is currently unlikely:

- It is likely to be harder at lower levels, the United States and Russia having eliminated a lot of the “fat” in their arsenals (e.g. redundancies etc.) over the past thirty years.
- The evolution of the strategic landscape makes it hard to continue to focus solely on traditional offensive systems: missile defense, hypersonic vehicles and so-called exotic systems developed by Russia can hardly be completely left out of the equation.⁹
- The cumulative conditions put forward by Moscow and Washington for a new strategic arms control arrangement places the bar *very* high. In addition to its traditional (and probably not *sine qua non*) demand to have UK and French arsenals taken into account, Russia wants missile defense, as well as conventional long-range strike systems, to be counted. The United States, for its part, would be uncomfortable with an arrangement that leaves China out of the picture.

There is more. At this point in time, however, as Pranay Vaddi and James Acton put it in a recent report, “*perhaps the single biggest challenge [to a new arms control treaty] (...) is simply the perilous state of U.S.-Russian relations.*”¹⁰ To that end, the US is part of the problem: its open-ended missile defense program appears to be a genuine source of concern among Russian analysts.¹¹ And US domestic politics would make the ratification of a new treaty even more difficult than it was in the past. However, the key obstacle is that Russia is much less of a *status quo* power than the Soviet Union ever was; Moscow is more interested in regaining a strategic advantage over the US than in codifying the existing competition.

Non-starters and counterproductive options

Some bad options exist regarding what should be done to improve strategic stability with Russia.

- One category is that of unilateral concessions as a “sign of goodwill”: such concessions would be immediately pocketed by Moscow. As a unilateral or a negotiated measure,

8 Hanna Notté et al., “Russia’s Novel Weapons Systems: Military Innovation in the Post-Soviet Period,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 0 (August 19, 2021): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2021.1946271>.

9 Per Russia, while the *Sarmat* Intercontinental-range Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and the *Avangard* Intercontinental ground-launched boost-glide missile (IGLBGM) would count under New Start rules, the *Kinzhal* air-launched ballistic missile, the *Poseidon* nuclear torpedo and the *Burevestnik* nuclear-powered long-range cruise missile would not.

10 Pranay Vaddi and James M. Acton, “A ReSTART for U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control: Enhancing Security Through Cooperation,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/02/restart-for-u.s.-russian-nuclear-arms-control-enhancing-security-through-cooperation-pub-82705>.

11 Russia argues that the US’s Aegis Ashore missile defense system, its Mark 41 Vertical Launching Systems sited in Romania and Poland, and parts of its drone system, violated the INF treaty.

Russia is much less of a *status quo* power than the Soviet Union ever was

withdrawing US nuclear weapons from European territory – a Russian demand for decades – would hurt the Alliance more than it would improve US-Russia relations.¹²

- A closely related idea is the concept of a “reset” – it has been tried several times with little positive result if any.
- Grand schemes aimed at revamping the Euro-Atlantic security architecture are a dangerous illusion. First, because given Moscow’s constant flouting of the rules it helped devising after the Cold war, how could one expect that Russia would abide by any new ones? Second, because any new scheme that would be acceptable to Moscow would either mean a right of interference in NATO affairs or the division of Europe into spheres of influence – concepts that go against all the principles that Western countries have promoted since 1990.¹³

Useful options to be explored

Options that would be desirable for enhancing strategic stability – and be acceptable to most European countries – include:

- A commitment to not increase their overall stockpiles. This modest, symbolic measure could be acceptable to Washington and Moscow since it would not preclude increasing operational stockpiles.¹⁴
- An aggregate ceiling for all nuclear warheads, including those for launchers not covered by the strategic arms control process, with “freedom-to-mix” for both parties.
- A ban on all ground-based INF-type launchers above a certain range and/or (in the absence of a new INF-type treaty), a bilateral commitment to not arm them with nuclear weapons.
- Limits on strategic missile defense, possibly including a ban on space-based interceptors.
- In light of the recent Chinese test, an amendment to the Outer Space Treaty to include fractional orbital bombardment systems (FOBS).

Perhaps of even greater interest to Europeans would be measures that lay outside the strategic arms control process. This includes ‘red lines’ on cyberattacks, in the spirit of those laid down by the Biden administration, or any agreement that would restore a modicum of predictability in the field of conventional deployments and exercises.¹⁵

Given the opacity of Russian intentions, steps to attempt better understanding of what political and military circles think in terms of Euro-Atlantic security would probably be welcome. To that effect, restarting all NATO-Russia Council activities and other political and military contacts, at all levels, that were suspended in 2014 should be considered. To be sure, this could validate the Russian narrative and claim that we have come to our senses. However, it now seems to make sense from a prospective costs-and-benefits calculation. A specific goal would be to better assess how much sincerity there is in some of the Russian arguments in the debate.

¹² The question of a “sole purpose” doctrine is not addressed here. Whether or not it would be desirable for the United States and NATO, it is very dubious that it would have any significant impact on US-Russia relations one way or the other.

¹³ Such naive proposals are even worse when suggested unilaterally, such as French President Emmanuel Macron’s 2019 “dialogue with Russia on a new architecture of confidence and security”.

¹⁴ A commitment to not increase operational stockpiles would have little chance to fly given the concerns about China’s nuclear future. It would also almost certainly be judged unacceptable for Beijing as well as by London and Paris.

¹⁵ Joseph S. Nye, “Will Biden’s Red Lines Change Russia’s Behaviour in Cyberspace?,” *The Strategist*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/will-bidens-red-lines-change-russias-behaviour-in-cyberspace/>.

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In addition:

- The European Leadership Network has suggested some measures to limit the risk of misunderstanding and close calls when Russian patrols get near sovereign territory, violate air spaces or engage in dangerous behavior in international spaces.¹⁶
- Technical measures such as hotlines – to limit misunderstandings in particular – are not without merit, and the multiplication of those at various administrative or military levels could be a positive development. However, hotlines are not always used in crises and cannot be the driver of political change.

Hardening our approach?

Less consensually among Europeans would be options to bolster deterrence in the Euro-Atlantic area that would signal a more offensive posture, aimed at tackling Russia from a position of strength, including for possible confidence-building negotiations. Among those that could be imagined are:

- A clearer reminder that the North Atlantic Council (NAC) remains the ultimate judge of what constitutes an “armed attack” in the sense of the Washington Treaty, and that its definition is subject to change as illustrated for instance by NATO statements about cyberattacks.
- A pre-authorization given to the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) to deploy elements of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) if it established a clear threat to the territorial integrity of one or several NATO members.
- National declarations according to which a hypothetical failure to reach consensus in the NAC would not preclude the bilateral exercise of collective defense should the need arise.
- A reminder to Russia that the security of European non-members that are partners of NATO could be of direct and material concern to the Alliance.

Even less consensual in Europe would be options designed to destabilize the Russian position – “taking Russia at its own game” – in order to create a level playing field:

- Should we reject a new dual-track approach (using the INF controversy of the 1980s as a template) regarding missiles in Europe?
- Should we reconsider our collective 1996 and 1997 commitments to not deploy nuclear weapons and significant combat troops in Central Europe?
- Should we bolster our missile defense system in Poland, Romania and elsewhere and cease declaring that they are not geared towards intercepting Russian missiles?
- Should we multiply air and sea patrols in the immediate vicinity of Russia?

To sum up: strategic stability should be seen as a political as much as – if not more than – a military concept; Europe should focus more on the ways to reduce Russia’s incentives to alter the status quo on the continent than on the nuclear balance; a more muscular approach designed to put us in a position of strength may have better chances to succeed in stabilizing the NATO-Russia relationship than unilateral gestures or concessions.

¹⁶ Thomas Frear, “Lessons Learned? Success and Failure in Managing Russia-West Military Incidents 2014-2018,” European Leadership Network, April 12, 2018, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/lessons-learned-success-and-failure-in-managing-russia-west-military-incidents-2014-2018/>.



The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

HCSS

Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA Hague

Follow us on social media:

@hcssnl

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

Email: info@hcss.nl

Website: www.hcss.nl