

HARD, BUT NECESSARY: UPHOLDING FOUR PRINCIPLES OF STRATEGIC STABILITY



Four principles of strategic stability

It is possible, at least conceptually, to sketch out a set of broad principles for U.S.-Russian strategic stability – those principles are rooted in Cold War legacies but need to be adapted, revisited, and broadened in light of changing strategic capabilities and threats:

1. Mutual assurance that neither country can dramatically degrade the other country's strategic capabilities – now to include not simply nuclear capabilities as in the Cold War but also space and cyber assets – we can call this *deterrence stability*.
2. A mutual commitment to preventing a future U.S.-Russian military crisis and in the event of such a crisis to avoiding political-military actions that would heighten the risk of escalation to open military conflict – or *crisis stability*.
3. A *shared assessment of nuclear dangers*, including most importantly, a reaffirmation of the Reagan-Gorbachev injunction that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought – any nuclear war.
4. A mutual readiness to take advantage of opportunities to *renew habits of cooperation* between Washington and Moscow, not least in cooperation to protect the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Obstacles to improved relationship

In practice, it has proved very difficult to apply those principles to the post-Cold War strategic relationship between the two countries – and it remains so today. Perhaps the best example is the long-running debate between Washington and Moscow on the impact of augmented U.S. missile defenses on deterrence stability. Washington has argued that enhanced but limited missile defenses are a necessary response to protect the American homeland against third party nuclear threats from new proliferators – and proposed many different non-treaty based measures to reassure Moscow about the scope and impact of those limited U.S. defenses. Moscow has consistently held that enhanced U.S. missile defenses (complemented by conventional strike options) are a threat to Russia's deterrent, downplayed if not dismissed any such regional proliferation threats to the American homeland, and rejected pursuit of non-treaty-based reassurances. Comparable difficulties could be set out regarding implementation of each of the other strategic stability principles.

The two countries are well along the road not only to strategic confrontation but to the *breakdown of over five decades of cooperative management* of their strategic relationship – not simply treaty-based arms control but all types of cooperative management with the goal of U.S.-Russian strategic stability. Within both Putin's Moscow and Trump's Washington, there are influential voices deeply skeptical of the past record and future payoffs of cooperative strategic management, or call it arms control if you like. For non-ideological experts in the United States, it increasingly seems illusory to argue for U.S.-Russian cooperative management of our strategic relationship – and thus, not worth doing so.

Given the mix of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election, President Trump's refusal to acknowledge it, the controversy over Russian violation of the INF Treaty, and historic Republican skepticism about arms control, odds would be against gaining Senate ratification for any new arms control treaty with Russia – or even gaining enough political maneuvering room for a five-year extension of New START prior to the 2021 deadline, which does not require Senate action but which the Congress could find ways to oppose.

Finally, ever since the negotiation of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile crisis, part of the underlying foundation of cooperative strategic management has been a shared appreciation of nuclear dangers – but with Moscow's apparent rethinking of the usability of nuclear weapons, there are very different views of nuclear dangers in Washington and Moscow.

Need for cooperative management

The two leaderships need to step back to ask themselves – both independently and jointly – whether the breakdown of cooperative management and its replacement by a new unfettered strategic unilateralism will serve U.S. and Russian security interests. For at least five reasons, my contention is that the answer is no – such a breakdown would be a strategic train wreck for both Washington and Moscow.

First, a breakdown of cooperative strategic management will increase the risk that a U.S.-Russian political-military confrontation will go out of control. Why? Because that breakdown will result in far fewer windows into each other's military capabilities, doctrine, and thinking – and in so doing, open up new possibilities for miscalculation and worst-case decision-making.

Second, a breakdown also will increase nuclear dangers for both countries. Why? Because of the risk that the ultimate miscalculation will be a use of nuclear weapons that regardless of the results of computer simulations and war-gaming will escalate out of control to a society-destroying strategic exchange – and preventing that miscalculation per my principles would be at the core of future cooperative strategic management.

Third, unfettered strategic unilateralism will be economically costly for both countries. Why? Because of the loss of windows into each other's activities, resulting worst case decision-making, and for the United States to invest in capabilities to protect against Moscow's belief that nuclear weapons are usable and then for Moscow to invest in counters to U.S. investments.

Fourth, a breakdown of cooperative strategic management will make it harder to cooperate in addressing third party threats and challenges. Why? In the midst of intensified political and military confrontation, such cooperation will lack bureaucratic and domestic political support.

Fifth, a breakdown of cooperative management will dramatically heighten the risk of significant erosion of the legitimacy, effectiveness, and support for the NPT, impacting still significant U.S.-Russian interests in a robust NPT. Why? Because U.S.-Russia nuclear reductions have been the only card both of our nations have played in demonstrating implementation of Article VI but even more so because such a breakdown will almost certainly lead to calls and actions by some NPT non-nuclear-weapon states – encouraged by NGO disarmament activists – to abandon the NPT in favor of the new Prohibition Treaty.

For all of these reasons, Putin's Kremlin and Trump's Washington need to go back to strategic basics and to ask themselves what would be at stake in the strategic train wreck both countries are approaching. How to do so? At best officially; otherwise the two presidents should create a greybeard panel of retired top-level civilian officials and military leaders to do so and report back to them.

This memo is prepared as part of the activities of the [Working Group](#) on Strategic Stability and De-escalation in U.S.-Russian Relations.