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TRUMP AND PUTIN HAVE TO TALK ABOUT DE-ESCALATION AND CYBER-INTERFERENCE



Since I delivered these remarks during a Track Two meeting between US and Russian experts, my essential point remains unchanged: Washington and Moscow need to discuss nuclear weapons and doctrine, even at the toughest bilateral moments. However, there remains a major obstacle to a similar discussion on reciprocal cyber threats: continued Russian interference in the political life of the US and European nations.

It is important that, at their Helsinki summit, Presidents Trump and Putin discuss measures to ensure that any confrontation – cyber or conventional – does not escalate to the nuclear level. The February 2018 Nuclear Posture Review makes more explicit a previously known risk: that cyber-attacks could conceivably lead to a nuclear weapons exchange.

I worry that – instead of that – two leaders who deny the reality of the 2016 events will simply revive their idea from their 2017 meeting to establish a joint working group on cyber-issues. That approach will not lead to serious results, at least unless and until the US and other Western services are able to confirm that the Kremlin has ceased its cyber-interference.

Modernization is tolerable

In the most straightforward definition of strategic stability, the current nuclear modernization programs of the US and Russia do not significantly affect nuclear stability. For the United States, survivability of a second-strike capability remains guaranteed. And the slight improvements in accuracy do nothing to make a US first strike option either tempting to American leaders or more credible and threatening to Russian leaders.

The Russian modernization program is rather less transparent, but the conclusion is the same. The survivability of the second-strike capability remains assured, and Russian first strike capability is not so dramatically improved that first strike would become an option for any sane leader.

My organization, the Arms Control Association, will continue to advocate for those options within both modernization programs that contribute to, and do not detract from, strategic nuclear stability. The status quo is not upset, but that's not the end of the story.

Politics erodes strategic stability

A number of other factors, both rooted in strategic thinking and in political/psychological factors, drive decisions in both capitals that will potentially erode strategic stability. On the US side, President Trump's obsession to outdo and undo any decision or policy made by President Obama drove the Nuclear Posture Review to recommend new options, including such as low-yield nuclear weapons. He may also take steps toward resumption of nuclear tests, with nonproliferation implications that would extend beyond the bilateral.

In both capitals, there are military leaders who express the view that the New Start numerical limits require the military to ensure qualitative improvements in the arsenal. Not only improved safety

and reliability, but improved accuracy and function, i.e. enhanced lethality. This is the sense in which it is accurate to state that the Russian-US arms race has been constrained quantitatively, but proceeds apace qualitatively.

Others have already noted that strategic nuclear stability may be more severely impacted by changes in conventional weapon technology than by modernization of the nuclear arsenal. Prompt global strike and hypersonic vehicles are not yet deployed in numbers that would upset the balance, but are already affecting strategic calculations; their implications are an urgent topic for bilateral discussion. A more immediate example is the US plan for ballistic missile defense and Russian desire to offset BMD, which (in my view) was an important part of Moscow's decision to deploy the intermediate range cruise missile, the 9M729, which in turn violated the INF Treaty. And this in turn creates the most important obstacle to renewed strategic stability consultations. There are other such daisy-chain effects, but this one is the most pressing.

An additional psychological – or, if you prefer, rhetorical – trend that worries me greatly: until a few years ago, only North Korea and sometimes Pakistan would speak about their nuclear arsenal as a central determinant of their national standing, of what “made us great”. President Putin adapted similar rhetoric a few years ago, and now President Trump employs it also. This not only undermines the global nonproliferation regime, it also requires planners in both capitals to consider more seriously the prospect that either side may be more willing than before to undertake a ‘limited’ use of nuclear weapons.

Cyber-interference is the ‘landmine’

Let me turn away from modernization to make my most important point. As a colleague of mine noted, in the current political environment in Washington “for non-ideological experts in the US, it is increasingly illusory to argue for Russia-US strategic cooperation.”

I count myself as one of those non-ideological experts. From my first day as a private citizen, I have argued publicly that Washington and Moscow must find a way to work together on nuclear issues, no matter how severe our disagreements on Ukraine, Syria and many other topics. I still believe that. But there is a real prospect that I will simply give up making the argument.

The Kremlin-directed interference in our political process included not just manipulation of social media, but massive state-assisted hacking of emails, followed by selective release of the stolen information, for transparently political goals. These are not “allegations”, they are facts. They do not fall within the beloved Soviet concept of “plausibly deniable”, and the personal credibility of anyone who repeatedly denies them is permanently undermined.

I do not expect Russian officials ever to admit these activities, just as I do not expect President Trump to open his tax records, or President Putin to admit his personal wealth. But I do know that if the Kremlin chose to stop this activity, the US would be able to detect and confirm that it had stopped. This would be a vital step in the arms control field, as it would give President Trump something that was taken from him by Moscow's cyber-campaign: a little bit of space to engage Russia on major issues.

Conversely, if President Putin chooses not to end these activities, that will also be detected in Washington. And that will convince me of the futility of engaging with Russia on these issues, or any other. I will not become “hysterically anti-Russian”, but I will focus my energy on working with partners who possess greater integrity and less innate hostility.

I do not expect my words to convince anyone in Moscow to change their approach. I am just one person, and not a very important one. But my view on this issue is, I believe, widely shared across the political spectrum. Simply stopping cyber-interference is the most immediate and important step Moscow can take to restart a meaningful security dialogue.

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