

UPDATING THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC STABILITY

Origins of the notion

It should be underlined that the concept of “strategic stability” was born in the late 1980s in the context of START-I negotiations to serve as a foundation of deep strategic arms reductions. In this role, it was designed to replace an amorphous and subjective notion of “equality and equal security” used at SALT-I and SALT-II negotiation of the 1970s.

In the joint U.S.-Soviet [statement](#) of June 1990, “stability” was defined as a state of strategic relations that is “removing incentives for a nuclear first strike.” This was to be achieved through a mutually acceptable “relationship between strategic offensive and defensive arms,” by “reducing the concentration of warheads on strategic delivery vehicles, and giving priority to highly survivable systems.” The most important features of this concept is that by definition “stability” is a mutually accepted state of strategic relationship and it serves as a basis of mutual arms reductions.

This sophisticated norm remains the first and, deplorably, the last joint formal legal U.S.-Russian definition of the concept for the elapsed 28 years. However, in the meantime, U.S. and Russian understanding of this notion has diverged far apart and presently has virtually no common ground left. The most striking examples are the U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) program, which runs contrary to the first principle of the 1990 Declaration (mutually acceptable “relationship between strategic offensive and defensive arms), as well as Russian new heavy “Sarmat” ICBM program which ignores the second and third principles (“reducing the concentration of warheads on strategic delivery vehicles, and giving priority to highly survivable systems”).

Need for updating the concept

No doubt finding an agreement on the narrow interpretation of strategic stability requires professional and pragmatic efforts due to a number of reasons.

First, since 2014 the possibility of nuclear first use has once again returned to U.S.-Russia strategic interactions due to the tense standoff between Russian and U.S./NATO armed forces over Ukraine, and in the Baltic, Black Sea, and potentially Arctic regions, as well as because of a lack of cooperation in parallel military operations in Syria.

Second, the development of new weaponry, C3I systems and operational concepts erode the traditional delineation between nuclear and conventional arms, between offensive and defensive systems, and between a local conflict and a regional—or even global—war.

Third, the development of weapon systems and strategic concepts of selective nuclear strikes such as U.S. “tailored nuclear options” or Russian “de-escalation” operations present yet another threat. In the latter case, clarifications from state authorities would be welcome if such concepts are no longer a part of Russian military doctrine.

Fourth, a persistent danger is presented by the ongoing disintegration of the arms control system and regimes, including the probability of collapse of the INF Treaty and the JCPOA with Iran, uncertainty regarding the New START extension and follow-on START, as well as CTBT, and NPT, to say nothing of FMCT and other agreements.

Five steps to improve strategic stability

The above-mentioned developments and issues may be discussed with varying degree of available data and clarity of implications. Nonetheless, some tentative and preliminary suggestions are possible as to the required adaptation and refinement of the 1990 version of strategic stability. As a start, contemporary Russian and American leaders should reconfirm unequivocally and without any reservations the conviction of their predecessors of the 1970s and 1980s that “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” As for particular details, those may be as follows:

First, the past definition of strategic stability should be expanded to read as “a state of strategic relations that is removing incentives for a nuclear first strike and a first use of nuclear weapons.” There must be a mutual understanding that any use of nuclear weapons, however limited, is inherently escalatory and should be excluded from bilateral strategic relations.

Second, it should be agreed that weapon systems threatening survivability of each other’s strategic forces and C3I assets imply first strike strategy and provoke preemption. While undertaking reduction of strategic forces both sides should give priority to downgrading prompt and slow counterforce capabilities against each other.

Third, expanding defensive systems to reduce each side’s vulnerability to third states and non-state opponents should be based on their agreement on a mutually acceptable relationship between strategic offensive and defensive arms.

Fourth, it should be acknowledged that space strike systems, and foremost anti-satellite arms, are highly destabilizing and should be banned or limited by verifiable agreements.

Fifth, the same should be agreed regarding cyber warfare technologies related to strategic C3I systems.

Sixth, the salvation of the arms control system must be urgently addressed at the top level of the principle powers, starting with the INF Treaty and ending with the START follow-on, JCPOA and the NPT.

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