

## CHAPTER 11

# **STABILITY BY ANY OTHER NAME: DIFFERING NATIONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF STRATEGIC STABILITY**

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Throughout the past decade, various high-level dialogues and negotiations addressing strategic stability have been held between Russia and the United States. However, these talks have failed to make substantive differences in bridging the divide between the United States and Russia. Disagreements still exist over the scope and content of these dialogues, with each country having their own particular opinions on what subjects should be discussed.<sup>1</sup> In view of the degraded strategic environment and the recently announced U.S./Russian strategic stability dialogues, serious analysis should be conducted of the factors that each nation believes are vital to strategic stability.<sup>2</sup> This understanding will be vital for both powers to avoid the pitfalls of the past and to increase the odds that the dialogues will be able to limit the possibility that the nuclear taboo will be broken. As it stands, the Russian and American understandings of which factors impact strategic stability have broadened over the past decade, limiting the prospects for effective dialogue on the subject.

It should be noted that this chapter is not concerned with establishing which nation holds the "correct" understanding of strategic stability. As Alexey Arbatov puts it, "it is difficult to find concepts that are more commonly used – and abused – than strategic stability and nuclear deterrence."<sup>3</sup> This is not something unique to any

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<sup>1</sup> Baklitskiy, Andrei, Sarah Bidgood, and Oliver Meier. "Russian-U.S. Strategic Stability Talks: Where They Are and Where They Should Go." Deep Cuts Commission, October 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Squassoni, "Biden in Geneva: Strategic Stability Is a Conduit for Arms Control," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, June 17, 2021,

<sup>3</sup> Arbatov, Alexey. "The Danger of Withdrawing From the INF Treaty." Carnegie Moscow Center, October 26, 2018.

particular state or actor. However, if progress is to be made in ameliorating the security environment and easing the tension between the United States and Russia, there needs to be a common understanding of the priorities and factors impacting each nation's understanding of the subject. To accomplish this, this chapter will focus on a close analysis of doctrinal and guiding documents written by United States and Russia between 2010 and 2020 to understand the degree to which each country's interpretation conforms to a narrow definition of strategic stability.

The decision to focus on a close analysis of doctrinal documents stems from the fact that such documents are expressions of the policies and motivations of a country, agreed upon and signed off on by the leadership of the country. They represent a declaration of their country's institutional and military priorities. While it would be naive to believe that some degree of political posturing or signalling would be absent in these documents, the topics focused upon in such documents can reveal a great deal of information about the factors that each state believes impact strategic stability. Additionally, in the words of Kristen Ven Bruusgaard, "although strategic debates, capabilities and military doctrines cannot authoritatively predict what leaders will do in a crisis, they constrain and shape what it may be possible for leaders to do. When it comes to nuclear strategy, such insights are crucial in seeking to ensure that leaders' theories about the utility of nuclear weapons in war will never be tested."<sup>4</sup>

For the purposes of this chapter, the baseline definition of strategic stability will be one where "strategic stability describes the absence of incentives to use nuclear weapons first (crisis stability) and the absence of incentives to build up a nuclear force (arms race stability)."<sup>5</sup> This definition, attributed to comments made by Edward Warner, is one of the narrowest definitions of strategic stability available. It adheres closely to the "Soviet-United States Joint Statement on Future Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Arms and Further Enhancing Strategic Stability."<sup>6</sup> This statement, which

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<sup>4</sup> Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2020): pp. 3–35, pg. 6

<sup>5</sup> Acton, James M. "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War." *International Security* 43, no. 1 (2018): 56–99.

<sup>6</sup> "Soviet-United States Joint Statement on Future Negotiations on Nuclear and Space Arms and Further Enhancing Strategic Stability." George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, June 1, 1990.

is the first use of the term agreed upon by the United States and the Soviet Union, viewed strategic stability as inextricably connected with "first-strike stability," a subset of crisis stability that is mainly concerned with the technical ability of a nation to field a successful retaliatory capacity, thereby deterring the adversary from "launching a large-scale damage-limiting first strike if it believed nuclear war had become imminent."<sup>7</sup> However, this chapter's definition is less focused on the technical aspects of a secure second-strike capability and more concerned with the possibility of nuclear first use and the qualitative buildup of arms. This decision was taken primarily due to the author's assessment that the use of nuclear weapons in a limited capacity would be more likely in the modern context than a "splendid" first strike intended to preemptively destroy an opponent's nuclear capacity.

## Russian Doctrinal Documents on Strategic Stability

When attempting to develop an understanding of the official Russian position on strategic stability, one must analyze the full range of documents in which the government uses the term. Guiding documents of the Russian Federation in such subjects as information policy and foreign policy include descriptions of how strategic stability relates to these fields. Given the almost-traditional refrain that arms control discussions and strategic stability dialogues must take into account "all aspects and factors that influence strategic stability, without exception," an understanding of the full scope of factors influencing strategic stability is necessary to pave the way for any potential progress.<sup>8</sup> Given the focus of this chapter, special attention will be paid to the 2010 and 2014 iterations of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (Military Doctrine) and the 2020 Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence (Basic Principles Document).

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<sup>7</sup> Acton, James M. "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War." *International Security* 43, no. 1 (2018): 56–99.

<sup>8</sup> Marrow, Alexander. "Russia Says It's Ready for Hypersonic Missile Talks with U.S." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, April 14, 2020.

## 2010 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation

The 2010 Military Doctrine was released in February of 2010, months before the signing of the New START Treaty. While the 2010 Military Doctrine did not include a definition of strategic stability, analysis of the document's use of the term can shed some light on the Russian interpretation of the concept. The 2010 Military Doctrine is also methodical in its approach, offering definitions for several key concepts and providing lists of both internal and external military dangers and threats. This analysis will focus on unpacking several of the threats and dangers that could impact the Russian understanding of strategic stability, as well as focusing its attention on moments where the term itself is used. An understanding of how these factors have evolved over time can give a more complete and holistic understanding of the Russian concept of strategic stability.

In the 2010 Military Doctrine, "attempts to destabilize the situation in individual states and regions and to undermine strategic stability" are listed among the primary military dangers faced by Russia.<sup>9</sup> The document does not state which countries are affected by the entanglement between political destabilization and strategic stability. It seems likely, however, that this is a reference to regional destabilization caused by the Color Revolutions. These uprisings, such as the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004/2005 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, resulted in a weakening of Russian influence in areas that Russia had traditionally considered its sphere of influence as these states sought political alternatives to their current system.<sup>10</sup>

If this interpretation of the statement is accurate, it implies a much broader interpretation of strategic stability than was covered by the traditional definition. It would be a much more literal definition of the term, perhaps, in that the shifting political leanings of certain former Soviet states would threaten the stability of Russia's long-term strategic goals. Nonetheless, it would be an expansion of the term of art far beyond its original boundaries. If this was the only time that the term was used in the document, it could perhaps be viewed as a separate concept. However, later in the 2010 Military Doctrine, one

<sup>9</sup> "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2010. Para. 8.b

<sup>10</sup> Lane, David. "'Coloured Revolution' as a Political Phenomenon." *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25, no. 2-3 (2009): 113–35. Pg. 129

of the main tasks for the Russian Federation's military is "to maintain strategic stability and the nuclear deterrence potential at adequate levels," which suggests that the original definition of the term had relevance to the authors of the 2010 Military Doctrine.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, it seems likely that the susceptibility of states in the Russian sphere of influence to regime change through protests can be seen to influence the Russian interpretation of strategic stability.

The 2010 Military Doctrine also expresses the Russian concern with "the creation and deployment of strategic missile defense systems undermining global stability and violating the established correlation of forces in the nuclear-missile sphere, and also the militarization of outer space and the deployment of strategic non-nuclear precision weapon systems."<sup>12</sup> This one subparagraph covers a number of subjects, all of which have some bearing on the Russian interpretation of strategic stability. These are factors which are often highlighted by Russian government officials speaking about strategic stability. For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov, speaking in 2011 at the 66th Session of the UN General Assembly, said that "progress in (the area of nuclear arms reductions) is inseparable from coordinated efforts to move forward on all aspects of strengthening international security and strategic stability. This includes the development of universally acceptable approaches to the missile defense issues, accounting of the impact of strategic conventional arms, prevention of weaponization of space, and elimination of qualitative and quantitative imbalances of conventional arms."<sup>13</sup> While Foreign Minister Lavrov went further than the conditions espoused in the 2010 Military Doctrine by tying conventional arms imbalance to strategic stability, much of what he said lines up perfectly with the Military Doctrine's assessment of the dangers posed by missile defense systems, the weaponization of space, and strategic non-nuclear weapon systems.

Should the potential of the systems described by Foreign Minister Lavrov ever threaten the survivability of the Russian strategic

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<sup>11</sup> "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2010. Para. 19c

<sup>12</sup> "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2010. Para 8.d

<sup>13</sup> Lavrov, Sergey V. "Statement by H.E. Mr. Sergey V. Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the 66th Session of the UN General Assembly ." UN.org. United Nations, November 27, 2011. Pg. 3

nuclear forces, then the incentives for an American disarming strike would rise, reducing crisis stability. It is for this reason that ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems in particular had been traditionally viewed under the purview of strategic stability, as evidenced by the development of the ABM Treaty.<sup>14</sup> While doubts about the operational efficacy of BMD systems abound, the present effectiveness of the systems is secondary to the perception that these systems might one day become truly effective.<sup>15</sup> If these systems are a danger in the minds of the Russian leaders, they are a factor influencing the Russian perception of strategic stability.<sup>16</sup>

The 2010 Military Doctrine details a series of military threats, which differ from military dangers in the level of probability that a military threat will lead to a direct military conflict. One of these threats consists of "the impeding of the operation of systems of state and military command and control of the Russian Federation, the disruption of the functioning of its strategic nuclear forces, missile early warning systems, systems for monitoring outer space, nuclear munitions storage facilities, nuclear energy facilities, atomic and chemical industry facilities, and other potentially dangerous facilities."<sup>17</sup> The focus on the dangers of disrupting nuclear command and control systems, a fear shared by the United States, is connected with crisis stability; if one state were to lose the ability to react effectively an incoming strike, then the other side could believe that they would have the ability to pull off a disarming strike with little fear of retaliation.

Finally, the conditions surrounding nuclear use encapsulated in the 2010 Military Doctrine should be examined to examine what could affect crisis stability. According to the document, "the Russian Federation reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in response to the utilization of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, and also in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional

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<sup>14</sup> Blackwell, Robert. "The ABM Treaty and Ballistic Missile Defense." Council on Foreign Relations, January 1, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, George N. "Ballistic Missile Defense Effectiveness." AIP Conference Proceedings 1898, no. 1 (November 15, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Podvig, Pavel. "Russia's Current Nuclear Modernization and Arms Control." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 2 (October 16, 2018): 256–67.

<sup>17</sup> "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2010. Para. 10.b

weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat."<sup>18</sup> Analysts at the time note that this was a much milder set of conditions than expected.<sup>19</sup> However, this declaration was complicated by the presence of a secondary nuclear doctrine, "The Foundations of State Policy in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence until 2020," which was signed at the same time, but remained classified.<sup>20</sup> The classified nature of this document is part of the reason that the United States placed such firm belief in the existence of an "escalate to de-escalate" policy; after all, "there is no reason to classify nuclear doctrine if it is the same as the public version."<sup>21</sup>

## 2014 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation

The 2014 and the 2010 iterations of the Russian Military Doctrine were quite similar, both stylistically and in their views of military dangers. However, a few key differences between the two documents bear discussion. These include the document's tendency to use the terms "regional stability" and "global stability" to describe areas where the term "strategic stability" might have previously been used, the addition of new military dangers and threats which are tied to stability, and differences in the definitions of some levels of military conflict.

The 2014 Military Doctrine only used the term "strategic stability" once, when it said that one of the primary tasks of the Russian Federation's military in terms of cooperation with other states was "to strengthen international security and strategic stability at global and regional levels on the basis of the rule of international law, and first of all the UN Charter provisions."<sup>22</sup> This use of the term was much broader than the traditional definition of strategic stability. It tied the Russian interpretation of strategic stability to a security

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<sup>18</sup> "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2010. Para. 22

<sup>19</sup> Борисов, Тимофей. "Николай Патрушев: Что Нового в Военной Доктрине России." *Российская газета*. *Российская газета*, November 20, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Sokov, Nikolai. "The New, 2010 Russian Military Doctrine: The Nuclear Angle." James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, February 5, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Schneider, Mark B. "Escalate to De-Escalate." *Proceedings*. U.S. Naval Institute, February 2017.

<sup>22</sup> "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation." *Посольство России в Великобритании*, December 25, 2014. Para. 55.a

environment that discouraged the use of military force to achieve military-political objectives.

However, this document often used the phrase "global and regional stability" as a substitute for "strategic stability". For example, where once the 2010 Military Doctrine described the destabilization of states as a danger which undermines strategic stability, the 2014 Military Doctrine described it as a danger which undermines global and regional stability.<sup>23</sup> As in the 2010 Military Doctrine, descriptions of the threat of missile defense systems, the weaponization of space, and the development of strategic, non-nuclear, high-precision weapons systems, were labelled as a threat to global stability.<sup>24</sup> In perhaps the most notable shift from strategic to global/regional security, the 2014 Military Doctrine states that one of the main tasks of the Russian Federation's military is to "to maintain global and regional stability and the nuclear deterrence potential at a sufficient level."<sup>25</sup> This adds credence to the claim that factors that are labelled as threats to global stability and regional stability in the 2014 Military Doctrine can also be interpreted as factors that the Russian government views as threats to strategic stability.

This leads to one of the more interesting additions to the list of military threats and dangers included in the 2014 Military Doctrine. The document lists the "use of information and communication technologies for the military-political purposes to take actions which run counter to international law, being aimed against sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity of states and posing threat to the international peace, security, global and regional stability" as one of the main external military dangers facing the Russian Federation.<sup>26</sup> The 2014 Military Doctrine discussed the juxtaposition of information and communications systems and global/regional stability in another context. One of the main tasks of the Russian military, as stated in the document, is to reduce the risks of using information and communications technologies for "military-political purposes," which could result in threats to "global and regional stability."<sup>27</sup> Given the aforementioned tendency of the 2014 Military Doctrine

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<sup>23</sup> "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation." Посольство России в Великобритании, December 25, 2014. Para 12.b

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Para. 12.d

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Para. 21.c

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Para 12.l

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. Para 21.s

to use global and regional stability interchangeably in the place of strategic stability, this would appear to be another factor impacting Russian calculations of strategic stability.

## Relevant non-military doctrines and statements

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, Russian official documents outside of the realm of strictly military matters exist dealing with the subject of strategic stability. To develop a complete understanding of the Russian interpretation of the subject, these documents must also be analyzed.

The Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation, released in 2016, goes to some length about technology's effects on strategic stability. Cybersecurity as it pertains to securing the nuclear command and control capabilities of a country would have a place under this chapter's definition of strategic stability. A cyberattack threatening these capabilities would have severe implications for crisis stability; a country who feels that an attack on their ability to field a nuclear response is underway would have strong incentives to launch a preemptive nuclear strike.<sup>28</sup> However, this document highlighted the dangers of transboundary information circulation being used for geopolitical goals and goals of a military-political nature.<sup>29</sup> When examined in conjunction with the 2014 Military Doctrine, it becomes evident that "protecting the information sovereignty of the Russian Federation" is a factor in Russian strategic stability calculations.<sup>30</sup>

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, also released in 2016, also discussed strategic stability in Russian policy. This document was conventional in its descriptions of strategic stability; it described the development of new weapons systems, missile defense systems, and the weaponization of space as threats to strategic stability. Additionally, it spoke of the need to devise new arms control agreements, and it discussed the Russian desire to partici-

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<sup>28</sup> Stoutland, Page O., and Samantha Pitts-Kiefer. "New Report Finds Nuclear Weapons and Related Systems Increasingly Vulnerable to Cyberattack." *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, September 26, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> "Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 5, 2016. Para. 8.e, 10, 20

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Para. 8.e

pate in multilateral efforts aimed at creating the conditions wherein additional nuclear reductions can take place.<sup>31</sup> These are all clear measures aimed at strengthening arms race stability in the classical sense through constraint-based measures. While the document insisted that these reductions could only take place "when taking into account all factors affecting global strategic stability, without exception," the document professed a serious intent to pursue these measures.<sup>32</sup>

However, the document strayed from a strict focus on the effects of nuclear weapons and related offensive and defensive weapons systems on strategic stability. The document described bilateral and multilateral relations with other countries, particularly nuclear weapons states, as a factor which can affect the state of strategic stability. The document states that cooperation between such states "with a view to resolving issues related to strategic stability" can strengthen strategic stability.<sup>33</sup> The achievement of a zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, the strengthening of nuclear export controls on dual-use technologies, and the prevention of acts of nuclear terrorism were also tied together with strategic stability.<sup>34</sup>

The 2016 Joint Declaration of the President of the People's Republic of China and the President of the Russian Federation on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability detailed a list of shared concerns and factors that the two leaders believed affected strategic stability. The main emphasis of the Joint Declaration was on the threat posed by the prospect "that individual States and politico-military alliances seek to gain a decisive advantage in the military or military-technology fields... to serve their own interests in international affairs through the threat or use of force."<sup>35</sup> Aside from the various military factors that have been discussed at other points in this chapter, the Joint Declaration also explicitly linked strategic stability with various political factors. It stated that "the international community is accustomed to viewing "strategic stability" as a purely military

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<sup>31</sup> "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 30, 2016. Para. 6, 27.d-f)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. para. 73

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Para. 27.k

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Para 27.h-k

<sup>35</sup> Joint Declaration of the President of the People's Republic of China and the President of the Russian Federation on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability § (2016). <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/834364?ln=en>. Pg. 2

concept in the field of nuclear weapons. This fails to reflect the breadth and multi-faceted nature of contemporary strategic issues."<sup>36</sup>

The Joint Declaration listed several features that would define their shared view of the political nature of strategic stability in international affairs, including a shared respect for the rule of law as it pertains to the use of force and coercive measures, respect for the legitimate interest of nations in settling regional and international issues, and the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other countries.<sup>37</sup> These three political issues highlighted covered a wide array of issues that have been of concern to Russia and China in terms of actions taken by Western States, including the use of sanctions as a coercive measure by the United States, opposition to moves such as the annexation of Crimea and expansion in the South China Sea, and the accusations of human rights abuses in both states. If these political factors are included in the Russian interpretation of strategic stability, dialogues which address "all factors which impact strategic stability" would necessitate a reversal of policy by the United States on several major points.<sup>38</sup>

## **2020 Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence**

The Basic Principles Document, released in June 2020, was a short document detailing the threats that nuclear deterrence was intended to neutralize and the conditions under which the Russian Federation would consider the use of nuclear weapons. The document discusses neither strategic stability or global and regional stability, as previous doctrinal documents have done. However, the threats that are underscored by the 2020 Basic Principles Document can still illuminate areas of concern for the Russian Federation in terms of factors that could impact crisis stability. Additionally, the document's discussion of the purpose of nuclear deterrence is helpful when considering factors affecting the Russian interpretation of crisis stability.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. pg. 3

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Pg. 3

<sup>38</sup> Lavrov, Sergey V. "Statement by H.E. Mr. Sergey V. Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the 66th Session of the UN General Assembly ." UN.org. United Nations, November 27, 2011.

The military risks that could lead to the development of military threats included a number of situations that have been highlighted in previous doctrinal documents, including the 2010 and 2014 Military Doctrines. These included the establishment of missile defense systems, the development of missile defense and strike systems in outer space, and the deployment of non-nuclear high-precision and hypersonic weapons.<sup>39</sup> The 2020 Basic Principles Document also highlighted the risks posed by the deployment of nuclear weapons on the territories of non-nuclear weapon states, a clear reference to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement.<sup>40</sup> In another clear reference to NATO, the 2020 Basic Principles Document stressed that its system of nuclear deterrence was implemented "with regard to individual states and military coalitions (blocs, alliances) that consider the Russian Federation as a potential adversary and that possess nuclear weapons and/or other types of weapons of mass destruction, or significant combat potential of general purpose forces."<sup>41</sup>

The document also offered expanded guidelines for the use of nuclear weapons, although the degree to which this represents an actual shift in Russia's policy is debatable. While previous guidelines on the use of nuclear weapons were still present in the 2020 Basic Principles document, the conditions of use of nuclear weapons were expanded to include retaliation when the Russian Federation received reliable data on the launch of ballistic missiles towards its territory, and the "attack by adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions."<sup>42</sup> These conditions have interesting implications for Russian definitions of strategic stability. Statements made by President Putin had previously implied that Russia had a launch-on-warning system in place, allowing for Russia to field a quick nuclear response to information stating that missiles were approaching Russia.<sup>43</sup> Doctrinal confirmation of

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<sup>39</sup> "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, June 2, 2020. Para. 12.a-e

<sup>40</sup> "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, June 2, 2020. Para. 12.f

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Para. 13

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Para. 19a-d

<sup>43</sup> Putin, Vladimir. "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club." Valdai Club. Speech presented at the Plenary session of the 15th anniversary meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, October 18, 2018.

this fact could serve to strengthen crisis stability by removing misconceptions arising from uncertainty about the alert status of Russian nuclear forces. However, the second condition, dealing with the disruption of Russian military sites that could impact Russia's ability to field a nuclear response, could be harmful for crisis stability. On its face, this is a reasonable concern; disruption of command and control capabilities would indeed threaten the assured retaliatory capacity of the Russian Federation. However, the entanglement of Russian conventional and nuclear capabilities could lead to an unintentional violation of this condition. According to Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, many of the non-strategic nuclear weapons systems in Russia's arsenal are dual capable.<sup>44</sup> In the event of an armed conflict breaking out, an adversary might attempt to attack a base where it believes that conventional weapons are deployed, only to realize later that the missiles in question were equipped with nuclear weapons, triggering a retaliatory response from Moscow. This posture is not unique to Russian nuclear doctrine; the 2018 Nuclear Posture review reveals that this is a condition that the American government feels could necessitate a nuclear response.

As discussed in doctrinal documents, the factors that impact the Russian understanding of strategic stability can be categorized into two broad categories. The first category includes military threats, such as the establishment of BMD systems, the weaponization of outer space, and the ability of long-range precision-guided munitions to potentially threaten Russia's second-strike capability. The second category involves political factors, which include issues such as the stability of nations in Russia's sphere of influence, the potential destabilizing impact of transnational information circulation and communications technologies, and non-interference in national affairs. In other words, the Russian interpretation of strategic stability "(places) strategic stability within the larger context of political, military, and economic relations between Russia and the West."<sup>45</sup> The breadth of the Russian interpretation of strategic stability complicates efforts to hold strategic stability dialogues which can sufficiently address "all factors that impact strategic stability."

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<sup>44</sup> Kristensen, Hans M., and Matt Korda. "Russian Nuclear Forces, 2020." Taylor & Francis. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 9, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Berls, Robert E., Leon Ratz, and Brian Rose. "Rising Nuclear Dangers: Diverging Views of Strategic Stability." Nuclear Threat Initiative, October 23, 2018. <https://www.nti.org/analysis/reports/rising-nuclear-dangers-diverging-views-strategic-stability/>.

## **American Doctrinal Documents on the Subject of Strategic Stability**

An analysis of doctrinal documents regarding the American interpretation of strategic stability reveals that the American view of strategic stability is primarily concerned with nuclear weapons and the potential for their use, rather than the effects of conventional weapons or missile defense systems. While there are few references to political factors impacting strategic stability, the need to provide assurances to U.S. allies under the nuclear umbrella is seen as a major factor impacting crisis stability. These concerns have also impacted American understandings of arms race stability, especially as they pertained to Russia's broad range of non-strategic nuclear weapons, which those strategists who place credence in the "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine believe would be used for coercive purposes. These factors played a large impact in the development of the 2018 NPR, which laid out an extensive list of conditions under which the United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons, risking crisis stability in an attempt to maintain the strength of the American deterrent threat.

### **2010 Nuclear Posture Review**

Analysis of the 2010 NPR should be guided by a number of considerations. The first among them are the policy shifts encapsulated in the document that are intended to increase crisis stability and arms race stability in a general sense. The second is through analysis of the steps that the United States undertook to reinforce strategic stability with Russia through the establishment of bilateral dialogues on the subject of strategic stability. The third is how the conditions for use of nuclear weapons in the 2010 NPR related to the NPR's discussions of maintaining deterrence capabilities and strategic stability while reducing the size of its strategic nuclear forces.

Many of the actions detailed under the 2010 NPR were geared towards strengthening crisis stability or arms race stability through technical and political means. The commitment to modifying the American ICBM forces so that each missile would only have a single warhead, a process called "deMIRVing", is one example of the 2010 NPR's attempts to strengthen crisis stability through

technical means.<sup>46</sup> This shift removed some of the incentives for an attempted disarming strike by creating conditions which "require an adversary contemplating attack to use more warheads in attacking ICBMs than the number of U.S. warheads they would destroy."<sup>47</sup> If the majority of the warheads in the American nuclear arsenal were grouped in a few stationary silos, the incentives for a disarming first strike could be increased. There were other potential reasons behind this step beyond a desire to strengthen crisis stability. As de-MIRVing the ICBM forces of the United States and Russia was a measure included in the negotiations for the START II Treaty, this decision could have been meant to show political goodwill by freely taking on obligations that would have been included in the treaty had it entered into force. It's possible that there was a strategic element to this decision as well; if the United States shifted its focus away from MIRVed ICBMs, it could load more warheads onto its MIRVed SLBMs under the restrictions of the New START Treaty.

The 2010 NPR also focused on improving the nuclear command, control, and communications infrastructure of the United States, maximizing the time available for the president to react to potential threats and reducing the likelihood that misperceptions caused by equipment malfunction would lead to the exchange of nuclear weapons.<sup>48</sup> In situations where early-warning systems detect incoming missiles, every second would count. Allowing the president the maximum amount of time to determine whether or not the warnings are the result of a false alarm would reduce the potential for escalation as a result of any misperceptions.

The decision to retire the TLAM-N, a cruise missile tipped with a nuclear warhead, could be seen as a step towards reducing misperceptions that could threaten crisis stability.<sup>49</sup> There were a number of benefits to this decision. The first among them was the political benefits that would come from signaling that the Obama administration intended to follow through with its promises to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in security doctrines. Additionally,

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<sup>46</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 6, 2010. pg. 25

<sup>47</sup> Committee on Armed Services., James Miller, and Ellen Tauscher. Document, Nuclear Posture Review: hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, second session, April 22, 2010 §. 63 – 689 (2011). Pg. 59

<sup>48</sup> Nuclear Posture Review Report, 2010, pg. 26

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. pg. 28

there was very little cost to the move, as the role of the TLAM-N was made redundant by the role of American SLBMs.<sup>50</sup> Finally, this move ensured that the United States would be able to use its arsenal of conventional cruise missiles in the event of conflict without worrying that the adversary would perceive this as an escalation to the nuclear level, thereby strengthening crisis stability. Misperceptions from the use of cruise missiles could still arise, particularly if the cruise missiles are targeted at command and control centers with integrated nuclear and non-nuclear roles.<sup>51</sup> However, the likelihood of nuclear escalation resulting from these misperceptions would be lower than if the cruise missile in question could potentially be carrying a nuclear warhead.

In an attempt to strengthen arms race stability, the 2010 NPR stated that the United States would refrain from developing new nuclear warheads or warheads that would provide for new nuclear capabilities, relying instead on Life Extension Programs (LEP) using components taken from existing warhead designs. This seems to have been an overture to Russia, whose modernization program is highlighted several times throughout the document.<sup>52</sup> By stating that the United States would refrain from modernization efforts that would expand the role of nuclear weapons by adapting them to address new military missions, the 2010 NPR implicitly invited Russia to follow the same actions in order to limit the destabilizing impact of new nuclear weapons systems and the increased role they were perceived to play in Russian nuclear strategy.

Additionally, this could be regarded as an attempt to lay down a foundation for future bilateral dialogues with Russia on strategic stability. The 2010 NPR highlighted the pursuit of high-level bilateral dialogues with Russia as a move aimed at "fostering more stable, resilient, and transparent strategic relationships" between the two nations, thereby reducing the incentives for first use that could arise from doctrinal and strategic misunderstandings.<sup>53</sup> The NPR stated that the dialogues would "allow the United States to explain that

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<sup>50</sup> Nuclear Posture Review Report, 2010, pg. 28

<sup>51</sup> Acton, James M. "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War." *International Security* 43, no. 1 (2018): 56–99.

<sup>52</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 6, 2010. pgs. iv, x, 4, 19, 28, and 29

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 28

our missile defenses and any future U.S. conventionally-armed long-range ballistic missile systems are designed to address newly emerging regional threats, and are not intended to affect the strategic balance with Russia."<sup>54</sup> In return, the Obama administration would seek explanations for Russia's nuclear modernization programs, request clarification of Russian nuclear doctrine, and discuss what steps could be taken to alleviate American wariness of the Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities.<sup>55</sup>

From the proposed subjects of these dialogues, we can extrapolate a wealth of information about American priorities in its definition of strategic stability. The Obama administration's concerns with nuclear doctrine and modernization programs were in keeping with a view of strategic stability which focused exclusively on nuclear weapons. Additionally, the presentation of the bilateral discussions reflected a desire to bring Russia's understanding of the concept in line with the American concept and away from concerns about BMD and conventionally-armed long-range ballistic missile systems. These desires never came to pass. The dialogues on strategic stability hit rocky ground amidst disagreements on BMD systems and non-strategic nuclear weapons. In August 2013, the United States announced that it would be postponing a session of the BPC, due in part "to lack of progress on missile defense, arms control, trade and commercial relations, global security issues, and human rights." Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, the United States fully suspended its participation in the BPC.<sup>56</sup>

The American focus on BMD systems and conventionally-armed long-range ballistic missile systems reflected the need for the United States to meet the commitments of extended deterrence while reducing its nuclear forces. The NPR addressed this directly, stating that by "maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent and reinforcing regional security architectures with missile defenses and other conventional military capabilities, we can reassure our non-nuclear allies and partners worldwide of our security commitments to them and confirm that they do not need nuclear weapons capabilities of their own."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pgs. 28 – 29

<sup>55</sup> Nuclear Posture Review Report, 2010, pg. 29

<sup>56</sup> Schreck, Carl. "Freeze Settles On U.S.-Russia Commission Amid Ukraine Standoff." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, March 28, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 6, 2010. Pg. 32

(NPR, 2010, p. 7). The 2010 NPR went into further detail about these regional architectures, stating that they “include effective missile defense, counter-WMD capabilities, conventional power-projection capabilities, and integrated command and control — all underwritten by strong political commitments. “However, as stated in the previous chapter, the conventional and BMD capabilities of the United States were viewed as intensely destabilizing under the Russian interpretation of strategic stability. As such, attempts to strengthen strategic stability through decreasing the role of nuclear weapons had the opposite effect; by increasing the American dependence on systems that were viewed as intensely destabilizing by Russia, modernization programs in Russia intended to defeat BMD systems were seen as all the more necessary, degrading arms race stability.

The NPR’s discussion of arms control measures, as exemplified by the nascent New START Treaty, is also deserving of analysis. As the document noted, “an early task of the NPR was to develop U.S. positions for the New START negotiations. In so doing, the review explored how a range of force structures might affect strategic stability at lower numbers.”<sup>58</sup> The doctrine addressed some of the details involved in its determinations, such as the unavoidable necessity of keeping a functioning nuclear triad, the need to maintain a secure second-strike capability, and the need to adjust its calculations to account for non-nuclear weapons systems intended to be used in developing PGS capabilities.<sup>59</sup> However, the NPR focused on the maintenance of strategic stability with Russia despite substantial cuts to the American nuclear arsenal, rather than the benefits to arms race stability that could be provided by the treaty’s transparency measures.<sup>60</sup> The lengthy descriptions of how strategic stability was maintained at lower force postures signaled to allies of the United States that the protection of the nuclear umbrella hadn’t been weakened by the treaty.

On three other occasions, the document linked strategic stability to the need to reassure American allies of their commitments to the American system of extended deterrence. While two of these instances discussed the need to maintain these assurances

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<sup>58</sup> “Nuclear Posture Review Report”. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 6, 2010. Pg. 20

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Pg. 20-21

<sup>60</sup> “Nuclear Posture Review Report”. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 6, 2010. Pg. 19

in the midst of force reductions, the third occasion stated that "enduring alliances and broad-based political relationships are the foundation of strategic stability and security."<sup>61</sup> Aside from the discussions on the subject of strategic stability dialogues, the nature of alliance commitments was the only area where the 2010 NPR diverged from strictly nuclear interpretations of strategic stability and entered the realm of the political interpretations of the term.

Finally, the NPR's language on the use of nuclear weapons must be addressed, to determine the degree to which the United States would rely upon nuclear deterrence to prevent conventional conflict. According to the 2010 NPR, "the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons... is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners...The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners."<sup>62</sup> The phrasing, which was quite similar to the phrasing to that involved in the Russian military doctrine, was the result of a compromise between two options regarding the role of nuclear weapons in American security policy. Some contributors to the 2010 NPR, including Ben Rhodes, the author of President Obama's 2009 Prague Speech, favored a no-first-use policy.<sup>63</sup> To that end, early drafts of the report included language stating that the "sole purpose" of American nuclear weapons would be to deter a nuclear attack on the United States and its allies. However, this was met with strong resistance, including from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who suggested that a "sole purpose" doctrine could lead nuclear threshold countries such as Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons, while at the same time unilaterally constraining the United States' military options.<sup>64</sup> Secretary Gates' suggested that the NPR should state that the "primary purpose" of nuclear weapons was to deter nuclear attack. This phrasing suggested a wealth of other purposes behind the possession and deployment of nuclear weapons and would allow the United States to retain a broader range of options than the "sole purpose" phrasing.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. Pg. 33

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Pg. 17

<sup>63</sup> Kaplan, Fred M. *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021. Pg. 231

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Pg. 229

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Pg 229

In the end, President Obama worked out a compromise between the two views. The existence of a "narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the United States or its allies and partners" precluded the ability of the Obama administration to offer a no-first-use guarantee.<sup>66</sup> (NPR, 2010, p. 16). Stating that nuclear weapons were "fundamental" to the deterrence of nuclear attack would satisfy the concerns of his Secretary of Defense, while the NPR's statement that the United States would act "with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons" would satisfy those in his administration who believed that anything less than a no-first-use declaration would be a betrayal of the values espoused in the Prague Speech.<sup>67</sup>

This compromise is emblematic of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review's entire approach. The document was a compromise of practicality and idealism. It laid out several attempts to strengthen strategic stability according to the traditional definition, while at the same time strengthening the promises that the United States would still deliver on its extended deterrence obligations. The document's emphasis on reducing the role of nuclear weapons in military strategy suggests a narrow and focused understanding of strategic stability, and its promises not to use LEPs as an excuse to endow nuclear weapons systems with new military functions shows a desire to limit the factors that could degrade arms race stability.

## 2018 Nuclear Posture Review

The Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review, released in 2018, was notable in several ways, not the least of which were its positions on the use of nuclear weapons to deter conventional warfare and its proposed nuclear modernization program. The focus on strengthening strategic stability is notably absent in this document; the phrase is only mentioned six times in the hundred-page

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<sup>66</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 6, 2010. Pg. 16

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Pg. 17; Kaplan, Fred M. *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2021. Pg. 231

document, three of them in the executive summary.<sup>68</sup> This lack of emphasis on strategic stability places some limitations on using this document to assess the Trump administration's positions on strategic stability. However, a close analysis of the 2018 NPR can contribute to understanding the evolving concept of strategic stability in the United States during the Trump administration. Similarly to the 2010 NPR, this iteration of the NPR served as much as a signaling device as it does a policy document. In much the same way that the threat perceptions detailed in the Russian military and nuclear doctrine augmented the statements of Russian leaders and experts, the 2018 NPR can reveal a wealth of information on the factors that affected the Trump administration's perceptions of strategic stability and the actions it took to advance these views.

The 2018 NPR highlighted the dangers of the return to great power competition that had begun to emerge in the years since the 2010 NPR. Instead of focusing primarily on the prevention of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism, it focused on state-level actors whose actions could trigger the alliance obligations of the United States. Along with Iran, China, and North Korea, the 2018 NPR painted a worrying picture of Russian intentions, detailing the doctrinal, technological, and political threats that Russia posed to the United States.<sup>69</sup> Doctrinal threats from Russia included the fact that "Russia now perceives the United States and NATO as its principal opponent and impediment to realizing its destabilizing geopolitical goals in Eurasia," and underscored the seriousness of the U.S. belief in the "escalate to de-escalate" strategy.<sup>70</sup>

American perceptions of the Russian escalate-to-de-escalate doctrine deserves some discussion in this chapter for their implications on the state of crisis stability. As crisis stability describes a situation characterized by the absence of "erroneous assessments of enemy intent, miscalculation, and misperception," the willingness with which American and NATO strategists to buy into this concept deserves some attention. The American belief in the escalate to de-escalate policy sprang from several sources. As briefly discussed, the first among them was the result of suspicions about the classified version of Russia's nuclear doctrine. Suspicions grew about poten-

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<sup>68</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2, 2018. Pgs. vi, vii, xvii, 26, 31, 73

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Pg. 26

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. Pg. 30

tial discrepancies between the officially released doctrine and the classified version, especially in light of statements issued by Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, implying a stronger role for nuclear weapons in Russian security doctrine.<sup>71</sup> Russian nuclear modernization efforts and the discrepancy in the comparative size of American and Russian non-strategic nuclear arsenals were areas of concern, as they suggested a doctrine that relies on their use "to escalate its way out of a failing conflict."<sup>72</sup>

Concerns about the vulnerability of the Baltic states also played a factor following the events in 2014 in Ukraine. Some analysts theorized that Russia would be able to retake the Baltic states before NATO could have a chance to react, defending their gains against the NATO counterattack through a combination of anti-access/area-denial systems and tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>73</sup> Finally, concerns existed about the degree to which Russia's defense policy relied on their nuclear capability, especially following NATO's actions in Kosovo. According to analysis by Dr. Nikolai Sokov, "from the perspective of the Russian military, reliance on nuclear weapons was a logical response to the glaring inadequacy of conventional forces premised on the perception that nuclear weapons had greater utility than deterrence of a large-scale nuclear attack."<sup>74</sup> This would give some credibility to those who believe in the "escalate to de-escalate" strategy. However, Sokov cited official documents suggesting that "reliance on nuclear weapons (was) seen as a temporary 'fix' intended to provide for security until conventional forces (were) sufficiently modernized and strengthened."<sup>75</sup> In more recent literature, Kristen ven Bruusgaard concurred with Sokov's point, believing that the Russian emphasis on deterrence through the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons was lessened once Russia's conventional capabilities were brought up to a sufficient level.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Schneider, Mark B. "Escalate to De-Escalate." Proceedings. U.S. Naval Institute, February 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Scaparotti, Curtis M. "NATO's Military Commander Concerned About Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe." Atlantic Council, May 3, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Colby, Elbridge, and Jonathan Solomon. "Facing Russia: Conventional Defence and Deterrence in Europe." *Survival* 57, no. 6 (November 23, 2015): 21–50.

<sup>74</sup> Sokov, Nikolai. "Russia's Nuclear Doctrine." Nuclear Threat Initiative, August 1, 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2020): pp. 3-35,

However, the 2018 NPR did not share the opinions of Sokov and Bruusgaard. Russian nuclear modernization programs and their focus on developing a comparatively wide arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons were highlighted as technical threats to the United States. The American perception that Russia would use non-strategic nuclear weapons for coercive purposes weakened conditions of both crisis stability and arms race stability between the United States and Russia. In an attempt to close the numerical gap between the United States and Russia in terms of non-strategic nuclear weapons, the 2018 NPR announced that the Trump administration would develop the W76-2 low-yield SLBM warhead and bring back the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile that had been retired in the 2010 NPR.<sup>77</sup>

The 2018 NPR was more concerned with establishing the credibility of the American deterrence posture and associated assurances than it was in building an environment where the conditions of strategic stability could be strengthened. It must be noted that much of the language in this document seemed intended to reassure allies and partners who were concerned about flagging alliance commitments. President Trump's earlier remarks that American fulfilment of its Article 5 commitments to NATO were contingent on equitable burden-sharing and assertions that NATO was "obsolete" resulted in worries that the strength of the transatlantic link was weakening.<sup>78</sup> To a substantial degree, the 2018 NPR functioned as a signaling document to American allies, demonstrating the willingness of the United States to maintain its security assurances despite comments made by the President.

The 2018 NPR stated that its strategy of tailored deterrence would "ensure Russia understands it has no advantages in will, non-nuclear capabilities, or nuclear escalation options that enable it to anticipate a possible benefit from non-nuclear aggression or limited nuclear escalation. Correcting any Russian misperceptions along these lines is important to maintaining deterrence in Europe and strategic stability."<sup>79</sup> While this statement served as a strong commitment to America's European partners, it walked a fine line by emphasizing the ties between conventional aggression and strategic stability.

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<sup>77</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2, 2018. Pg. 54

<sup>78</sup> Santora, Marc. "Trump Derides NATO as 'Obsolete.' Baltic Nations See It Much Differently." *The New York Times*, July 10, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2, 2018. Pg. 31

The 2018 NPR's statement on the employment of nuclear weapons should be analyzed with this statement in mind. The 2018 NPR states that "Russia must...understand that nuclear first-use, however limited, will fail to achieve its objectives, fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict, and trigger incalculable and intolerable costs for Moscow."<sup>80</sup> This does not represent a fundamental change in doctrine. The fact that intolerable costs will follow from the use of nuclear weapons has been a hallmark of deterrence since the Soviet Union and the United States entered the world of mutually assured destruction. However, the document expanded upon this declaratory policy in great detail, laying out a list of conditions under which the U.S. would consider the use of nuclear weapons.

These considerations began by echoing the language of the 2010 NPR, stating that "the United States would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners." However, the 2018 NPR went a step beyond the 2010 iteration of the review, stating that nuclear weapons use would be considered in response to non-nuclear strategic attacks, which "include, but are not limited to, attacks on the U.S., allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks on U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities."<sup>81</sup> Instead of the limited circumstances involved in President Obama's compromise between "sole purpose" and "primary purpose," the 2018 NPR envisaged a world where nuclear weapons would play a broader role. While the U.S. has traditionally kept the option of using nuclear escalation to counter conventional attacks open, the 2018 NPR referenced the role of nuclear weapons in deterring conventional attacks "at least thirty times."<sup>82</sup> Additionally, threatening a nuclear response to attacks on nuclear command and control structures had concerning implications given the increasing entanglement of conventional and nuclear command and control structures.

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<sup>80</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review Report". Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2, 2018. pg. 30

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Pg. 21

<sup>82</sup> Hersman, Rebecca. "Nuclear Posture Review: The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same." Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 6, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nuclear-posture-review-more-things-change-more-they-stay-same>.

The combination of intensive nuclear modernization programs and the expanding role of nuclear weapons in American security doctrine implies that the Trump administration did not subscribe to the same understanding of strategic stability as the Obama administration. The 2018 NPR emphasized the strength of the American nuclear deterrent as a means of avoiding conventional war and assured American allies of U.S. commitment to extended deterrence rather than limiting the incentives for the use of nuclear weapons. In his presentation of the 2018 NPR, Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation Chris Ford stated that the NPR aimed "to make both great power conflict and nuclear weapons use less likely by preserving our ability to deter aggression in the face of evolving adversary postures — which, these days, means convincing the would-be aggressor that he will not be able to confront us with an insoluble strategic dilemma by being able to threaten the use of, or indeed actually employ, one of the growing range and diversity of nuclear weapons and delivery systems currently being developed by Russia and China."<sup>83</sup> Framed like this, one could almost be convinced that the 2018 NPR was nothing less than a final realization of the 2010 NPR's vision of a world where deterring nuclear attack is the sole purpose of nuclear weapons. However, Ford neglected to discuss the various roles that nuclear weapons played in the 2018 NPR in deterring acts of non-nuclear aggression against a variety of targets.

Perhaps a fuller understanding of Ford's beliefs on the subject of strategic stability can be found in his earlier writings. In 2013, Ford contributed a chapter to a book published by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College entitled "Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations." In it, he describes his own particular view of strategic stability, which "defines strategic stability as a situation in which no power has any significant incentive to try and adjust its relative power vis-a-vis any other power by unilateral means involving the direct application of armed force against it. General war, in other words, is precluded as a means of settling differences or advancing any power's substantive agenda."<sup>84</sup> This view of strategic stability is noticeably broader than this chapter's definition of strate-

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<sup>83</sup> Ford, Christopher A. "Nuclear Weapons Policy in the Trump Administration ." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, May 30, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Ford, Chris A. "Anything But Simple: Arms Control and Strategic Stability." Essay. In *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations*, edited by Elbridge A. Colby and Michael S. Gerson, 201 — 69. Carlisle Barracks PA: U.S. Army War College, 2013. Pg. 202

gic stability and expands the area of crisis stability as it pertains to deterrence. With its focus on using flexible nuclear options to deter non-nuclear aggression, the 2018 NPR seemed to be based on Ford's interpretation of strategic stability.

If the burden of deterring general war is placed too heavily on nuclear weapons, then there may come a time in which the deterrent threat of the United States is tested. Events have the tendency of outpacing the ability of actors to control them; reaction, not action, becomes the driving force of events. The American system of extended deterrence and the nuclear umbrella that is associated with it has always meant that the United States could be forced to make a choice between breaking the nuclear taboo or accepting the degradation of the credibility of the American extended deterrence commitments. To use nuclear weapons would involve both immediate political costs and result in the near inevitability of escalation, but to forgo the use of nuclear weapons would incur severe reputational costs and a weakening of the American network of allies. By raising the stakes for conventional action taken against the partners of the United States, the 2018 NPR accepted a degradation of crisis stability in return for raising the credibility of their deterrent threat.

Concerns about potential vulnerabilities to nuclear coercion had a heavy impact on the American interpretation of strategic stability. The factors impacting strategic stability in the U.S./Russian relationship were three-fold. First, there were concerns that Russian aggression could lead to a situation where America and its NATO allies would need to act with conventional weapons, and that Russia would resort to first use or the threat of first use of nuclear weapons as a measure to protect the gains that they had achieved. This would be an example of an outside force negatively affecting crisis stability. The second threat to crisis stability came from within; in the case of conventional aggression against an ally of the United States, alliance commitments under the nuclear umbrella could necessitate an escalation to the nuclear level. Finally, there were arms race stability concerns arising from Russian nuclear modernization efforts and their arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons, which suggested that Moscow saw the potential to use tactical nuclear weapons as warfighting tools rather than elements of deterrence. These three concerns shaped Washington's interpretation of strategic stability into something which closely resembled the definition of the concept advanced

by Chris Ford in 2013, in which the strength of strategic stability was dependent on the degree to which it could prevent the outbreak of general conflict.

## Conclusions

The Russian and American governments have very different understandings of strategic stability. These interpretations are affected by both their strategic interests and their perceptions of the threats their country faces, which have undergone significant changes over the last decade. Some aspects of the Russian and American national understandings of factors that impact strategic stability have come to resemble each other, such as the need to prevent the outbreak of armed conflict between Russia and the United States. However, the differences between the two interpretations have the potential to limit the ability for strategic stability talks to result in practical results. Understanding the various factors that impact these interpretations is the first step on the path towards progress towards making progress on various subjects of concern for both countries.

While arms race stability considerations dominated American concepts of the term in the beginning of the decade, the reemergence of great power competition led to a shift to a concern with crisis stability, a factor that was aggravated by the extensive American alliance commitments. Furthermore, the growing reliance on nuclear weapons to prevent not only nuclear exchanges, but non-nuclear aggression expanded the American conception of threats to crisis stability. The American view of arms race stability in the latter half of the 2010's was concerned with the need to cover up gaps in the ladder of escalation to prevent nuclear coercion and the implementation of the perceived "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine, leading to the development of the W76-2 low yield warhead and the decision to start a program of work on developing a new nuclear SLCM. Additionally, the American interpretation of strategic stability only encompasses nuclear weapons, rather than incorporating BMD systems and other non-nuclear considerations.

The Russian conception of strategic stability has remained relatively constant, if broader than the concept of strategic stability relied upon in this thesis. Military threats to strategic stability in the Russian viewpoint include American and NATO missile defense systems,

especially those based in Europe, the growing capabilities and precision of American long-range conventional weapons, and the weaponization of space. Political concerns included the destabilizing impact of protests in countries that Russia had considered to be in its sphere of influence, the equal implementation of international law as Russia interprets it, and the destabilizing impact of information and communication technologies.

The upcoming bilateral dialogues on strategic stability are a promising method of limiting the likelihood that U.S./Russian competition will escalate to the nuclear level. If those involved are realistic in their expectations of what these talks can accomplish and avoid taking an all-or-nothing stance, the dialogues could serve as a foundation to be built off of in the coming years. Risk reduction measures in particular would serve as a promising subject for the talks. Rather than focusing on systems which only one side views as a threat to strategic stability, such as non-strategic weapons or missile defenses, risk reduction measures that take into account areas of convergence in national interpretations of strategic stability could potentially lead to tangible results. An agreement to refrain from targeting command and control systems, for example, could serve both sides and potentially pave the way towards addressing the entanglement of conventional and nuclear weapons systems. If these dialogues are to succeed, the United States and Russia will both have to learn from the failures and misunderstandings of the past in order to secure our future.