



PROCEEDINGS

The Meaning of ‘Strategic Stability’ and What to Expect from a U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “The Meaning of ‘Strategic Stability’ and What to Expect from a U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on July 27, 2021. The symposium focused on how the notion of strategic stability has been applied from the Cold War to the present and expectations for the future in light of renewed strategic stability talks with Russia.

Keith B. Payne

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The United States and Russia will soon begin a much-heralded strategic stability dialogue “to lay the groundwork for future arms control.” To risk understatement, there has been a paucity of Western thinking, civilian or military, devoted to the subject of deterrence stability for decades. That lack of attention has finally come to an end, but Cold War thought and jargon continue to dominate much apparent official thinking and most public commentary.

What is the legacy Cold War meaning of strategic stability? Very briefly, during the early years of the Cold War, American civilians developed a particular nuclear deterrence paradigm that was the basis for declared deterrence policies known popularly as a “stable balance of terror.” This paradigm assumed that for rational U.S. and Soviet leaders, mutual societal vulnerability to nuclear retaliation would ensure an overpowering disincentive to either’s nuclear provocation. Mutual vulnerability was expected to enforce stable deterrence.

The “mirror-imaging” presumption underlying this reasoning was obvious: U.S. and Soviet leaders, even with their obvious differences, were expected to calculate and act according to a common set of reasonable goals, norms and values, i.e., those prominent in the United States.

¹ These remarks are drawn from Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, *The Strategic Stability Dialogue: Think Before You Speak*, Information Series, No. 495 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press), July 8, 2021, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/IS-495-final.pdf>.



The functioning of deterrence was considered predictable precisely because U.S. and Soviet perceptions and decision making were assumed to be similar and well understood—and thus predictable. Deterrence was thought to be understood in such detail that different types of strategic forces could be categorized as predictably stabilizing or destabilizing. Nuclear policies or programs that contributed to mutual societal vulnerability were said to be stabilizing, while those U.S. forces that might impede the Soviet nuclear retaliatory threat to U.S. society were judged unnecessary for deterrence and likely destabilizing. Armed with this supposedly precise knowledge of how deterrence would function, destabilizing forces could be eliminated or subjected to limits via arms control.

Codifying deterrence stability in this way became the priority purpose of U.S. strategic arms control efforts. This approach to arms control follows from the underlying Cold War stability paradigm and its presumption that the conditions that constitute stable deterrence are understood and strategic forces can be categorized as stabilizing or destabilizing.

An inconvenient truth, however, is that this stable deterrence paradigm was highly questionable during the Cold War; it is even more so now because the contemporary international threat environment is far more diverse and unpredictable.

Contemporary adversaries may well not share the U.S. definition of reasonable behavior, value system or decision-making process. They may not share U.S. perceptions of nuclear risk or consider U.S. balance of terror-style threats sufficiently credible to be deterred by them. Indeed, their goals and decision making may drive behavior that recklessly threatens U.S. and allied security in ways deemed “unthinkable” per the Cold War stability paradigm.

For example, the Cold War stability paradigm assumed similarly reasonable decision-makers with essentially defensive deterrence goals, but at least some contemporary opponents appear to see nuclear weapons as tools of coercion. The United States must now contend with adversaries who are willing to employ coercive nuclear first-use threats to achieve their revisionist geopolitical goals. For example, China’s apparent nuclear first-use threats to Japan should Tokyo join with the United States in response to a PRC invasion of Taiwan reportedly included the suggestion that China would seize the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands in the process. This is an unprecedented coercive use of nuclear weapons for offensive purposes.

These relatively new post-Cold War conditions require a new understanding of deterrence stability—one that takes into account the great variability and diversity in adversaries’ beliefs, perceptions, and goals. Indeed, the presumptions underlying the Cold War stability paradigm are now so divorced from the realities of the international environment that it can no longer be considered a prudent guide for U.S. deterrence or arms control considerations.

The forces now necessary for deterrence may vary greatly depending on the opponent and context. In particular, technical characteristics alone cannot be the basis for declaring a



capability to be stabilizing or destabilizing—understanding opponents’ goals and perceptions also is key, particularly the purposes they envisage for their nuclear arsenals. Are those purposes essentially defensive, i.e., for the preservation of an existing order and boundaries? Or, are they essentially offensive, i.e., for the destruction of an existing order and boundaries?

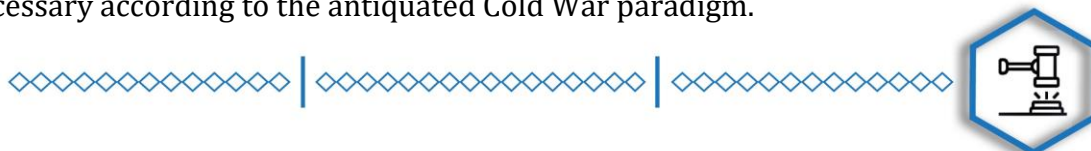
The same types of nuclear weapons may be put into service for offensive or defensive purposes, and correspondingly, the same types of weapons may be highly destabilizing or stabilizing depending on the intended purpose. This reality upends the apolitical stabilizing vs destabilizing categorization of forces derived from the Cold War stability paradigm.

It must now be asked: How do Moscow’s leaders, and the leaderships of other nuclear-armed states, perceive the risks associated with limited nuclear first-use threats or employment? And, what nuclear risks are these leaders willing to accept in pursuit of their expansionist goals, including Moscow’s goal of re-establishing the hegemony in much of Eurasia that Russian leaders believe the West unfairly wrested from Moscow. And, more to the point, how credible against Russian and other limited nuclear first-use threats (that may avoid U.S. territory entirely) is the old U.S. balance of terror-oriented deterrence threat when the consequence for the United States of executing such a strategy could be its own destruction?

The same questions must be asked of China’s leadership and its thinking about nuclear weapons use and risk—especially with regard to Taiwan.

These opponents’ contemporary use of coercive nuclear first-use threats to advance revisionist geopolitical goals certainly reflects behavior that the Cold War deterrence paradigm simply dismisses as impossible for any rational leadership. Again, the contemporary reality of those goals and threats demolishes the apolitical Cold War categorization of systems as “stabilizing” or “destabilizing,” and correspondingly, the basic Cold War notion that arms control should be about focusing on those systems that the Cold War paradigm defines as “destabilizing.”

A spectrum of U.S. deterrence threat options seems only prudent in the post-Cold War threat environment given the diversity of opponents, their expressed nuclear threats, and the potential variability of their decision making. The need for credible deterrent options other than, and more flexible than the massive society-destroying threats envisioned in the Cold War’s stable balance of terror deterrence paradigm is now obvious, but not new. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown discussed this need in 1979. This deterrence requirement for flexibility, is magnified greatly by the uncertainties of the post-Cold War environment, opponents coercive nuclear first-use threats, and the multiplication of opponents and threats. Correspondingly, U.S. deterrence policies and capabilities must now be resilient and flexible to support credible deterrence policies across a diverse range of strategic threats to us and our allies. Yet, such U.S. capabilities continue to be criticized as “destabilizing” or unnecessary according to the antiquated Cold War paradigm.



In conclusion, what are the take-aways from this discussion? In light of contemporary geopolitical realities, the aged strategic stability paradigm must not be basis for discussing deterrence or arms control. The United States must avoid an approach to arms control that is predicated on its rigid and narrow definition of what is adequate for deterrence and what constitutes stabilizing and destabilizing policies and capabilities. Instead, we must re-establish the meaning of strategic stability consistent with post-Cold War threat realities and identify an approach to arms control that contributes to the resilient, flexible U.S. force posture that may be necessary to preserve peace and order. Understanding the inadequacies of the archaic Cold War stability paradigm and the danger of conducting arms control as a function of that paradigm is now critical given the dramatic changes since the end of the Cold War.

Michaela Dodge

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First, let me talk about the implications of the Cold War stability paradigm for measuring strategic stability during the Cold War. Then I will talk about how that shaped the U.S. arms control process. Lastly, I will mention lessons learned for future arms control.

Measuring Strategic Stability During the Cold War and Arms Control

As Keith mentioned, the concept of strategic stability defined as assured destruction capability reigned during the Cold War. It can be traced as an offshoot of Secretary Robert McNamara's "assured destruction" concept. The United States developed various sets of metrics of differing value for assessing such defined strategic stability with our archrival the Soviet Union. These metrics were largely quantitative and focused on measurable attributes of nuclear weapon systems.

They were attractive to a wider defense community because they were easily understood by members of Congress. The heavy reliance on quantitative approaches translated into an attractive scientific appearance and impression of certainty, despite the fact that they could not reflect an incredible complexity of an interaction between two adversarial forces.

Quantitative metrics have become so ingrained in U.S. strategic thinking that few appear to have paused to ask whether these metrics measure the right attributes and whether they are applicable to our adversaries. In the words of our esteemed colleagues Fritz Ermarth: "The more simplistic analysis is more convenient. The analyst can conduct it many times, and talk over his results with other analysts who do the same thing. The whole methodology thereby acquires a reality and persuasiveness of its own."



Legacies We Carry Today

The arms control process beholden to the strategic stability paradigm demanded and incentivized “countable” nuclear force categories like a number of launchers or delivery systems. It tended to discount others due to difficulties in counting and verifying them (for example payload and actual warhead numbers). It imposed artificial distinctions between “strategic” and “tactical” nuclear weapons. Not because such a distinction makes sense, it doesn’t, but because “tactical” nuclear weapons’ numbers and key characteristics are particularly difficult to verify given the absence of highly intrusive verification measures.

Due to the importance attributed to arms control in U.S. Cold War national security strategy, measuring forces in a quantifiable manner suitable for arms control took on a life of its own with academics and policy analysts. Parity meant that the United States and the Soviet Union had a roughly similar number of whatever it was that we were counting without that much thought to qualitative differences among forces, differences in U.S. and Soviet international obligations, or perhaps most importantly—purposes to which countries built their forces. One cannot divorce forces from their political purpose, as Colin Gray pointed out over and over again.

Lessons for Future Arms Control

Regardless of whether quantitative approaches had merit in the past, it is preferable to leave it in the Cold War where they belong. In today’s environment, where overall nuclear forces levels are lower, infrastructure decrepit, nuclear-armed opponents and threats more numerous, U.S. deterrence goals more diverse, the omission of relevant factors would be more consequential. Given what we know today, what principles should guide future arms control efforts?

Posture for success. We should not modernize our forces just so we can get an arms control agreement. But it is obvious that we will have naught to discuss if we don’t have something the other party wishes to negotiate about. Sergei Ivanov, then-Chief of Staff to Russian President Vladimir Putin, said in 2013, “When I hear our American partners say: ‘Let’s reduce something else,’ I would like to say to them: ‘Excuse me, but what we have is relatively new.’ They [the U.S.] have not conducted any upgrades for a long time. They still use Trident [missiles].”

Value strategic defense in its own right. Even if one thought it was worth it to limit defense because it was “destabilizing” under the Cold War paradigm, an opinion I do not share, it would not be appropriate to restrict them today. The United States and allies face a multitude of actors armed with ever more sophisticated and capable missiles. Missile defenses provide a measure of protection from consequences of a deterrence failure—and a decision whether deterrence fails is not in our hands. Additionally, defenses can help to



remove an adversary's coercive leverage in the homeland and regional context. This makes them highly stabilizing rather than destabilizing and ought to exempt missile defense from being subjected to limits in an arms control process.

Limit the duration. During the Cold War, the main features of the U.S-Soviet balance of terror evolved slowly. The purpose of strategic arms control was to codify it. Arms control agreements were to “lock-in irreversible limits.” The underlying presumption was that the then-current conditions would remain in place and that the U.S. understanding of deterrence would continue to apply. But arms control agreements can make sense only so long as the conditions that recommended them continue to hold—and those conditions may change rapidly. Just think about a difference between 1985 and 1990. Or 2000 and 2005. Because it is difficult for the United States to invoke supreme political interest clauses, arms control treaties should be of limited duration and/or contain easily-implemented provisions that allow adaption to shifting threat conditions as necessary.

Consider the nuclear production complex. During the Cold War, we didn't have to worry as much about other countries' production complexes. That is because our own production complex was very capable—and that allowed us to focus on all those countable categories. We were reasonably sure that we could respond in a timely manner to any developments in an adversary's warhead capabilities. Very unlikely we can do so today. The asymmetry could negatively impact what kind of deals other states are willing to strike with us. Herman Kahn said, “We must look much more dangerous as an opponent than as a collaborator, even an uneasy collaborator...” Our security would be well served by heeding his advice.

David J. Trachtenberg

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As both Keith and Michaela have pointed out, it is time to reconsider our definition of “stability” and its applicability in the post-Cold War era. I would also argue that it is time to break free of the notion, embraced firmly by arms control devotees, that arms control is a necessary tool for achieving greater stability, especially between the United States and Russia. Unfortunately, the history of arms control tends to refute this common, though mistaken, perception.

For the past half century, the United States has looked to arms control as a means of managing the strategic arms competition and forestalling an “arms race.” Arms control

² These remarks are adapted from David J. Trachtenberg, *Overselling and Underperforming: The Exaggerated History of Arms Control Achievements*, Information Series, No. 497 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press), July 22, 2021, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/IS-497.pdf>.



treaties were thought to be useful in maintaining strategic “stability” and avoiding unnecessary expenditures, reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy, and demonstrating the declining utility of nuclear weapons in international relations.

As the Biden Administration engages in a new strategic stability dialogue with Russia with an eye on negotiating a future arms control agreement, it is important to learn the lessons of history—and what history teaches is that the promises made by treaty supporters about arms control enhancing strategic stability through greater transparency and predictability often exceeded the results achieved. Indeed, in some cases, U.S. restraint resulting from arms control agreements actually encouraged the Soviet Union and later Russia to take destabilizing actions that increased the threat to U.S. security.

For example, the SALT I Interim Agreement and the ABM Treaty were both thought to enhance strategic stability by capping the growth in offensive nuclear arsenals and codifying mutual vulnerability to nuclear annihilation. In fact, the ABM Treaty was sold as an agreement that would nullify the need for further increases in Soviet nuclear weapons. But while U.S. strategic defenses were reduced and subsequently eliminated, the Soviets engaged in a massive strategic nuclear buildup that demonstrated the fallacy of U.S. thinking and the vastly divergent strategies of the two sides.

Arguably, our agreement to remain vulnerable contributed to the Soviets’ incentive to develop large counterforce capabilities to threaten the American homeland—a significantly destabilizing development. This was hardly representative of the often-expressed belief in an “action-reaction arms race” dynamic or its “inaction-inaction” corollary.³

Likewise, other treaties fell short of the ambitious achievements their proponents trumpeted. For example, SALT II was fatally flawed and never entered into force. START I was said to result in force levels that were roughly the same as when the talks began nearly a decade earlier. And the supposedly “equal” nuclear warhead limits in New START were set at a level that allowed Russia to build up to the limit while forcing the United States to reduce.

Although New START was hailed by its supporters as restoring transparency and predictability to the U.S.-Russia relationship, its verification procedures were less robust than those in the original START I treaty, undermining its verifiability.⁴ Consequently, its

³ For a detailed analysis of this commonly expressed narrative, see David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>. Also see David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/OP-6-final.pdf>.

⁴ Bryan Smith, *Verification After the New START Treaty: Back to the Future*, Information Series, No. 463 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 16, 2020), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-463.pdf>.



value as a tool for improving the bilateral relationship is not only problematic, but its purported benefits—as sold by supporters to the Congress and the American people—far exceeded its accomplishments, as evidenced by the precipitous decline in the U.S.-Russia relationship since 2010 and the expansion of Russia’s coercive threats and outright military aggressiveness.

Moreover, the shortfalls of arms control in ensuring stability are exposed by a history of Russian arms control non-compliance. This behavior can hardly be called stabilizing. Indeed, Russian cheating on the INF Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty led the Trump Administration to withdraw from both.

Although arms control proponents have hailed various treaties as fostering greater stability in the U.S.-Russia relationship, in reality the United States today faces a much more assertive Russia than before—again, hardly an exemplar of stability and predictability. Indeed, various commentators have suggested that the strategic situation today is one of greater risk and uncertainty, and that the potential for nuclear conflict is greater than ever. Hence, the main objectives of arms control espoused by its proponents appear to be ephemeral at best, if not completely illusory.

With Russia violating its arms control commitments; building new nuclear weapons systems that circumvent existing arms control treaties; making brazen nuclear threats against other countries, including non-nuclear states; conducting massive exercises of its strategic nuclear forces that rival its actions during the Cold War; and placing increasing emphasis on nuclear weapons in its own strategy and doctrine—how can arms control be seen as having succeeded in fostering stability?

Now there are those who believe that the answer to the failure of arms control is more arms control. I’m reminded of the famous quote, attributed to Albert Einstein, that “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” Much like an addictive narcotic, arms control appears to dull sound judgment and make you want more.

As newly-confirmed Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins tweeted this week, “I am committed to reduce the risk of nuclear war by effective arms control, [and] limit Russian and PRC nuclear expansion....”⁵ Yet another quote worth citing is from the recently released Joint Nuclear Operations document, which states: “Despite concerted US efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in international affairs and to negotiate reductions in the number of nuclear weapons, since 2010 no potential adversary has reduced either the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy or

⁵ Bonnie Jenkins tweet, July 25, 2021, available at <https://twitter.com/UnderSecT/status/1419392587924914178>.



the number of nuclear weapons it fields. Rather, they have moved decidedly in the opposite direction.”⁶

While arms control may, in theory, be useful in establishing lines of communication between potential adversaries and cultivating dialogue, the belief that arms control agreements will improve strategic stability between the parties reflects the triumph of hope over experience.

Yes, arms control does work best when it’s needed least. And the only way arms control can contribute to stability is if the parties share similar goals and objectives. However, Russia and the United States do not share the same goals and objectives, and, in fact, often work at cross purposes. The United States seeks a stable and peaceful world order. Russia—and to an increasing degree, China—seeks to overturn a world order that it believes has been unfairly dominated by the United States and the West.

With such conflicting worldviews, the idea that arms control can contribute to stability seems to be a chimera. Indeed, even some arms control enthusiasts have acknowledged there is no common understanding of “what constitutes strategic stability,”⁷ and as Keith and Michaela have pointed out, “the United States must re-establish the meaning of strategic stability consistent with the new realities of the post-Cold War threat environment....”

Above all, we should be realistic in our expectations about what a strategic stability dialogue is likely to achieve. Overselling arms control as a means to bring about stability perpetuates a myth and does a disservice to the cause that arms control proponents purport to advocate—that of promoting a more stable and secure world.

Franklin C. Miller

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On June 16 Presidents Biden and Putin announced in a Joint Statement that the United States and Russia would “... embark together on an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue in the near future....”

⁶ Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-72, Joint Nuclear Operations*, 17 April 2020, p. I-1, available at https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_72_2020.pdf.

⁷ Michael Krepon, “Let’s Discuss Strategic Stability,” *Arms Control Wonk*, July 6, 2021, available at <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1212358/lets-discuss-strategic-stability/>.

⁸ These remarks were drawn from Frank Miller, “Talking About Strategic Stability” published in *RealClear Defense*, July 8, 2021, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/07/08/talking_about_strategic_stability_784613.html.

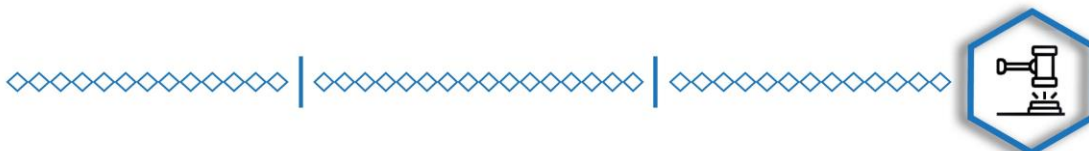


This brought rejoicing in several quarters, particularly among arms-control proponents here at home and in NATO Europe. But a clear-eyed assessment requires us to acknowledge that concern rather than enthusiasm is called for. Holding a dialogue on “strategic stability” is superficially appealing until we realize that, while the term is thrown about in academic and even some government circles, there is no agreed definition (even within the US government and certainly not between the American and Russian governments) of what “strategic stability” means—let alone how such a discussion can, as the Biden-Putin statement proposes “lay groundwork for future [arms control] agreements.”

Even Western arms control theorists debate what “strategic stability” means. To some, it’s about “first strike stability”—a situation where neither side has either an incentive or a force structure designed to carry out a disarming first strike against the other. That’s a nice theoretical idea in the West, but it never took hold in Moscow. Historically Soviet and today Russian ICBM forces are designed around a first strike, there being no other reason to maintain the heavily MIRVed SS-18 ICBM for decades only to begin replacing it recently with the larger “Sarmat” missile. To other Western academics, “strategic stability” represents the flip side of “first strike stability”: a situation in which neither side threatens the other’s second-strike retaliatory capabilities; both Washington and Moscow seemingly adhere to this concept, but only Russia continues to pursue first strike disarming capabilities notionally aimed at reducing U.S. second strike potential—raising serious questions about the degree to which Moscow truly subscribes to it. Alternatively, strategic stability might mean “arms race stability,” in which neither side begins fielding new weapons systems as long as its potential opponent does not. But again, Russia began modernizing all of its nuclear forces – both long-range and shorter-range systems—over a decade ago while at the same time the United States was content to allow its existing forces to age until well into the late 2020s.

Strategic stability has also been applied to avoiding accidents between the air or naval forces of the United States and Russia in order to prevent inadvertent loss of life and escalation. But such agreements—the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement and the 1989 Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities Agreement—already exist and remain in force; the problem is that the Russian military—under explicit direction (or at least tacit approval) from the Putin Administration—routinely ignores them by harassing U.S. and allied units in a dangerous and unprofessional manner. (The recent treatment of the British destroyer HMS Defender in the Black Sea is the latest case in point.)

Strategic stability could also be applied to avoiding fears of surprise attack by conventional forces, thereby reducing international tensions. This, too, however has already been addressed: the 2011 Vienna Document calls for the parties to provide notice and transparency regarding exercises; Russia routinely ignores the Vienna Document by lying about the size of its exercises and by convening massive “snap drills” which foster fears among observers that they are actually preparations for an invasion or attack.



In a perfect world, strategic stability talks might also address cyber attacks on critical infrastructure and key capabilities such as nuclear command and control systems; that said, cyber capabilities and operations are so highly classified that there is no reasonable prospect of a meaningful outcome in a U.S.-Russian discussion about them. President Biden's warning to Vladimir Putin in Geneva is as much as can be done in the diplomatic sphere, with deterrent operations necessary if Russian attacks continue.

Given all of the above, what then might we expect from a dialogue on "strategic stability"?

With respect to avoiding dangerous interactions between U.S. and Russian forces and avoiding threatening exercises, no dialogue should be necessary. Russia needs to be reminded of its existing obligations and we should avoid any suggestion that we would make new concessions to get them to observe them. Russian negotiating tactics since the mid-1940s have often demonstrated, in the words of Averill Harriman, "getting us to pay for the same horse twice." That should not happen again.

Halting or curtailing the needed modernization of U.S. nuclear forces (as some would have us do in the name of "restoring arms race stability") similarly should be off the table: we have reached a point where our forces must be replaced or retired; there is no middle ground. And according to Putin's Defense Minister, Russia's nuclear modernization program already is over 80 percent completed.

Realistically speaking, therefore, the only area which might usefully be discussed in a future "arms control (not "strategic stability") dialogue" is updating New START. If addressed correctly, there is potential promise here, but it requires breaking from the arms control establishment's traditional approach. Existing arms control canon calls for a new round of reductions in U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces. But this approach is not only threadbare but flawed on multiple counts. First and foremost, it ignores the bloated Russian arsenal of shorter-range forces. Russia has a fully modernized force of several thousand ground-, air- and sea-launched nuclear weapons designed for use on the battlefield and in the theater. All of these are dubbed "non-strategic," but the old saw that a weapon is "strategic" if one is in the impact area applies. Russian tactical and theater weapons—not their intercontinental ones—are likely the first to be used in any war, and it is therefore essential to capture those in any new agreement. Second the United States has little to trade off against these Russian systems, having eliminated 95 percent of U.S. counterpart weapons in the 1990's pursuant to the George H.W. Bush-Gorbachev and Bush-Yeltsin Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (which Russia failed to implement with regard to its short- and medium-range nuclear forces). As a result, Russian interest in a separate agreement on "non-strategic" nuclear forces is non-existent.

The only sensible way—from both a deterrence standpoint and a negotiating one—is to seek a new agreement which would replace New START and capture all deployed U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons ("deployed" defined as all weapons not in the dismantlement queue). This



would exploit the fact that Russia is in fact interested in keeping New START in one form or another. (The Trump Administration embraced this approach in mid-2020, but by the time it was deployed it was both too late given Russian considerations of U.S. domestic politics and complicated by the Administration's goal of including China.) As an opening move, the United States might propose that each side be limited to 3,500 nuclear weapons of all types. Each side would have total freedom to mix its forces under that cap. The arms control community—again bowing to existing canon—will object to the “optics” of “increasing the cap” from New START's limit of 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear weapons (which is really about 2,300-2,500 given the way bomber weapons are counted) to 3,500 total weapons, but the willful refusal to acknowledge and count tactical and mid-range weapons ignores the very real danger those weapons pose.

Moscow will likely counter by seeking to include U.S. hypersonic weapons and missile defense systems. The United States should not agree to discuss either. First, the United States (unlike Russia—or indeed China) has no current or planned nuclear-tipped or dual-capable hypersonic systems: the Army, Navy and Air Force programs which the Pentagon is pursuing are still in advanced development and are in any event conventional only. Russia and China have each deployed nuclear armed hypersonic systems. Second, the Navy hypersonic systems are a vital response to Russian and Chinese deployment of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) systems, and would be absolutely essential in wartime. If a separate agreement involving conventional hypersonic systems is to be contemplated, it ought to include calling for permanently dismantling the A2AD complexes those U.S. systems are being deployed to counter (and this would have to extend to cover those built by China on the artificial islands President for life Xi promised never to militarize). While hypothetically attractive from a deterrent and national security perspective, this is a completely unlikely outcome and therefore should not be pursued.

The poisonous politics of missile defense in both Washington and Moscow argue that no agreement acceptable to one side will ever be acceptable to the other. (Indeed, it was the missile defense issue which prevented START II from entering into force and thereby from eliminating MIRVed ICBMs in the 1990s.) Seeking to incorporate missile defenses into an agreement would prove to be a time-consuming sideshow which would have great potential to derail any progress which might have been made on nuclear weapons.

At the end of the day therefore, “talks on strategic stability” translates realistically into “talks about further limits on U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons.” Establishing an overall limit would represent progress. Anything less would not. No deal is better than a bad one.

