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Senior Study Group on Strategic Stability

Sustaining the Nuclear Peace: On the Urgent Need for a New Strategy for Stability

United States Institute of Peace

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Letter from USIP Board Chair and Acting President

There is no more potentially devastating threat to global peace than nuclear conflict. As President Trump argues, the consequences of a nuclear war would be catastrophic.[1] In the whirl of day-to-day affairs, the prospect of nuclear war can seem remote. But peace among nuclear powers cannot be taken for granted. And today that peace is particularly fragile.

Two of the world's major nuclear powers, Russia and China, continue investing in their nuclear capabilities and resisting opportunities to negotiate in good faith. Nuclear peace is further threatened by the growing number of states with nuclear arsenals or nuclear aspirations. The greater the number of nuclear powers, the larger and more complex the problem of securing and maintaining the peace. In this context, the prospects for further regional conflicts, nuclear escalation, and even direct confrontation between nuclear-armed powers, are only growing. The trend lines are clear, and they are headed in the wrong direction.

Every U.S. president since the end of the Cold War has sought to build more cooperative relations with the other major nuclear powers on nuclear stability and security. President Trump is the latest in this long line, calling for the major nuclear powers to work together to reduce tensions and shrink arsenals.[2] We hope this report will serve as a useful catalyst for these important debates.

The proposition that peace, like conflict, includes a nuclear dimension, has been a cornerstone of the work of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) since its creation by Congress in 1984 as an independent, nonprofit, national institution. USIP, America's premier peacebuilding organization, is committed to its mission of pursuing peace and contributing to the prevention and peaceful resolution of violent conflict abroad. Its founding Act begins with an account of the concerns that drove the need to create the Institute. The first concern listed is this: "People throughout the world are fearful of nuclear war."[3] Throughout its history, USIP has worked to address that concern.

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1 See for example President Trump's remark that if nuclear weapons were ever used, "That's going to be probably oblivion," in "Trump proposes nuclear deal with Russia and China to halve defense budgets," The Guardian, February 13, 2025, available at https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/13/trump-nuclear-russia-china.

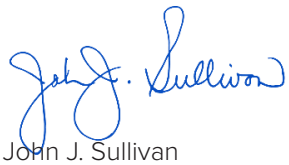
2 See for example Zeke Miller and Michelle L. Price, "Trump Wants Nuclear Arms Talks with Russia and China," The Associated Press, in Defense News, February 13, 2025, available at https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2025/02/13/trump-wants-nuclear-arms-talks-with-russia-and-china/.

3 The United States Institute of Peace Act, Pub. L. No. 98-525 (October 19, 1984), 98 Stat. 2492, 2649, 22 U.S.C. 4601-4611, as amended.

In recent years, USIP led two major studies on strategic stability—one with a bilateral U.S.-Russian focus, and one with a U.S.-Chinese focus. Both were driven by a recognition of the need to arrest the ongoing deterioration of the fragile nuclear peace, and both explored the themes of deterrence and dialogue.[4]

USIP is proud to continue that tradition by convening and hosting this bipartisan, high-level Senior Study Group on Strategic Stability. The findings of the study group suggest the need for a greater sense of urgency and for new strategic approaches that include nuclear diplomacy.

The views expressed in the study group's report are those of the group's members alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of their home organizations. USIP does not take institutional positions and therefore does not hold a view of the study group's conclusions. The Institute does warmly commend the study group members for their commitment of time and energy to this endeavor and for their success in forging agreement on powerful new findings and recommendations. The erosion of strategic stability is accelerating, the threats to durable peace are real, and the right time for informing critical debates—as this study group report will do—is now.



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Chair of the Board
Washington, DC

George E. Moose
Acting President
Washington, DC

4 United States Institute of Peace, "A Practical Agenda for Enhancing Strategic Stability with Russia," unpublished manuscript, December 2021; and Patricia M. Kim, ed., "Enhancing US-China Strategic Stability in an Era of Strategic Competition: US and Chinese Perspectives," Peaceworks no. 172, United States Institute of Peace, April 2021, https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/enhancing-us-china-strategic-stability-era-strategic-competition.

Introduction

When we first convened as a study group in late 2023, we set the following objectives: to update our thinking about the state of stability in the strategic military relationship between the United States and Russia, to understand the threats to systemic peace between and among major nuclear powers more generally, to assess the effectiveness of US policy approaches, to characterize the strategic choices facing the United States, and to devise and recommend a new approach that promises greater success in preventing major-power war and preserving systemic peace.

We began our work with some shared judgments. One was that the future of strategic stability for the US-Russian relationship must be understood in the broader threat context. It became clear early on in our discussions that it was impossible to examine US-Russian strategic stability usefully without broadening the scope to include China, North Korea, and Iran—such is the magnitude and breadth of the shifts underway in the threat environment. We agreed that strategic stability, though eroded, was not yet beyond repair. We believe that the United States and its allies and partners have agency in these matters and can, through alacritous self-help, disrupt these trends and put matters back on a more positive trajectory. Finally, we judged that bipartisan agreement on something as fundamental to US security as systemic peace and nuclear deterrence is possible—and imperative.

Building on these foundations, we spent a year exploring the concept of strategic stability, the current challenges to strategic stability, and the strengths and weaknesses in a modern context of the legacy US strategy for stability. We then formulated a new approach, which we believe to be well aligned with today's more challenging security environment and with the interests and capacities of the United States (and also its allies and partners). We recommend its adoption and implementation with urgency. We do so unanimously and without reservation, which inspires our confidence that bipartisanship can carry the day on these high national priorities.

In the course of our work, we were reminded that a great deal of ink has been spilled trying to define strategic stability. For reasons explained in the body of the report, we have developed the following definition: Strategic stability is a condition in which the political relations and military balance between states that pose an existential threat to each other are such that they perceive neither a compelling need nor a viable opportunity to advance their interests at the expense of the vital interests of the other through the use of military force, and especially nuclear weapons.

Our work was informed by the reports of the most recent Strategic Posture Commission and the Commission on the National Defense Strategy.[1] Some of the members of our study group

were involved in one or the other of these commissions. Their reports, together with this report, paint a compelling picture of a radically changed post-Cold War security environment and of the difficult decisions that US policymakers must make to adapt to it. Those decisions are overdue. But the solutions are within our reach.

This report proceeds as follows. The analytical portion begins with an assessment of the nuclear security environment; in our judgment, stability, deterrence, and security are all eroding—and at an accelerating rate. We then turn to an assessment of US policy. US nuclear policy has many different elements addressing deterrence, assurance, and strategic stability. Our focus is on the strategy for stability, which we see as cross-cutting. In our judgment, the long-standing US approach is not fit for purpose in today's world; it has failed to deliver and will not deliver the desired results. Something new and substantial is now required of the United States. We then elaborate the key elements and associated concepts for a new strategy for stability. That strategy reprioritizes deterrence, refocuses diplomatic engagement, and bolsters the enablers of success. We close with the argument that the time for wishful thinking is over, and that a new generational effort is required to confront the dangers now arrayed against us as a nation.

We believe that the need for action is urgent. Thus, the report begins with a distillation of findings and recommendations that can be rapidly implemented by the US Government. These items are highlighted at the front of the report to focus political attention on the near-term steps needed to address critical imbalances and to signal a change of course to US adversaries and allies and partners. Such signals can be expected to have a positive impact on deterrence, assurance, and strategic stability. We also make recommendations for ongoing and enduring initiatives.

This report enjoys the unanimous support of the study group's members and appears without caveats or other dissents.

Near-Term Priorities: Key Findings and Recommendations

Findings

1. *The United States and its friends and allies have a great deal at stake in preserving the nuclear peace.* Doing so requires preventing both nuclear escalation in war and the conventional wars that may give rise to such escalation. It also requires accounting for new nuclear-armed challengers—the peace is largely but no longer exclusively a function of relations among rival major powers. A situation in which all of these conditions are met might be deemed a "systemic peace."

2. *But preservation of this peace is in growing doubt*. That doubt follows from the intensifying threats by nuclear-armed challengers to the United States and US allies and partners. Given the far too slow US response over several decades to those challengers, those adversaries may believe that their strategies are working. Their strategies involve coercive bargaining for regional and strategic advantage conducted using both conventional threats and nuclear tools—and an increasing degree of cooperation from and collaboration with like-minded revisionist partners—and they may be emboldened to further test US limits, and those of the United States' allies, with an intense militarized and nuclearized crisis. Stamina and resolute determination as evidenced by buttressing military capabilities are thus critical; adversaries' misjudgment of the resolve of the United States to defend its interests if threatened and attacked could lead to a global catastrophe. Moreover, their gains in circumstances short of all-out war could be highly detrimental, tempt nuclear proliferation, and threaten catastrophic deterrence failure. In short, the stakes are high.

3. *Washington and Moscow do not share a common view of the threats to strategic stability or even its value. As a result, their strategic approaches have diverged sharply since the end of the Cold War.* The United States pursued engagement and risk reduction of all kinds and put its military focus elsewhere. In the nuclear realm, it reduced the role of nuclear weapons in its strategy, pursued large-scale reductions, retired its warhead production capabilities, and rejected "new" nuclear weapons. In contrast, Russian leaders became outwardly hostile to the United States and its allies, rejected engagement and cooperation, and put their military focus on neutralizing NATO. In the nuclear realm, they made significant new investments and designed novel systems, modernized and expanded a significant theater-range nuclear arsenal (in part through violating arms control agreements and promises), improved their homeland defense

systems to protect against US attacks, and developed increasingly sophisticated concepts of coercive bargaining.[2] Russia has also moved to expand its sphere of influence and control and worked to abet the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran.[3] These actions are deliberate and part of a larger strategy of aggression. The renewal of high-level diplomacy between Washington and Moscow could re-open a window of opportunity to put the bilateral US-Russian relationship on a better footing.

4. *Washington has been frustrated in its efforts to build a strategic military relationship with China based on the principles of strategic stability, dialogue, and cooperation.* Like Moscow, Beijing has rebuffed US calls for sustained, substantive, and high-level dialogue on strategic stability. It has also rejected arms control and even resisted nuclear risk reduction cooperation, while itself engaging in a massive and unprecedented nuclear buildup across the full range of delivery systems. Like Russia, it has modernized its doctrine and forces on the assumption of regional war with US-led alliances.[4] It too complains about any and all US actions it dislikes as destabilizing. China's emergence as a much more significant factor in US nuclear strategy brings with it the unique new challenge for the United States of being able to deter simultaneously or sequentially both near-peer nuclear adversaries.

5. *In the meantime, the strategic landscape has grown more complex and dangerous in other ways.* In Northeast Asia, North Korea has developed new nuclear capabilities and now poses an existential threat to South Korea and Japan and a significant threat to the United States.[5] In the Middle East, Iran has positioned itself as a nuclear threshold state and as a potential existential nuclear threat to Israel; already, Tehran has mounted multiple long-range missile and drone attacks directly against Israel.[6] Moreover, the threat looms of proliferation cascades if tipping points are crossed in East Asia and/or the Middle East. Like Russia and China, these regional adversaries have developed new ways of war built on a belief in the utility of nuclear weapons for broad purposes that encompass not just deterrence but also coercion and defeat.

6. *One of the most challenging aspects of this emerging threat landscape is that America's adversaries are increasingly cooperating among themselves against the United States and its allies and partners.* Russia and China have formed a "friendship without limits" and are expanding their military cooperation in various troubling ways.[7] Russia has become a treaty ally of North Korea, which has sent combat forces to fight alongside Russian forces in Ukraine. Iran is receiving diplomatic and economic support from China and Russia, even as Iran, China, and North Korea all support Russia's defense industrial base in President Vladimir Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine. It appears that a new axis is emerging. Regardless, there is no longer (if there ever was) ***just*** a "China problem" and a separate "Russia problem." Any crisis or conflict involving one adversary will likely involve others, either directly, in the form of coordinated aggression, or indirectly, in the form of opportunistic aggression.[8]

7. *In response to these developments, the United States has been reluctant to come to terms with the new danger around us.* For a long time, the erosion was hardly noticed in Washington, given its long-standing assumptions that both Russia and China could be converted into responsible stakeholders in jointly managing transnational problems—or that they might even be transformed into liberal states. Even after the return of great power rivalry as a central theme in US defense strategy, military adaptations have been slow. The United States has pursued modernization of its nuclear deterrent as a replacement program based upon a significantly downsized version of Cold War nuclear forces and not as an opportunity to adapt to meet new deterrence requirements. It has fallen behind in command-and-control modernization. It has done little to strengthen extended nuclear deterrence, after having nearly abandoned theater-range systems even as its adversaries invested heavily in them.

8. *The net result is that strategic stability has eroded. War between major powers is increasingly likely. Wars with other nuclear-armed states also appear increasingly likely. Thus, the risk of nuclear use in war is also increasing.*

9. *This leads us to a simple conclusion: The US strategy for stability since the Cold War is not applicable to the emerging security environment. The United States can continue to stick to that approach while hoping to patch the cracks in the foundation—but this will only bring mounting danger. It is time for a new foundation*.

10. *The United States must adapt its approach to the new circumstances.* Doing so requires embracing the agency of the United States in managing these challenges. There is much that the United States can do, including together with its allies and partners, to restore and safeguard strategic stability. But success requires that it reset priorities. In the first decades after the Cold War, the United States gave post-Soviet Russia and China every opportunity to engage in meaningful nuclear diplomacy—opportunities they largely rejected. Despite growing signs of belligerence from both countries, the United States has been far too slow to adjust. Having now discovered the depths of revisionism in Moscow and Beijing, the shortfalls in the United States' conventional and nuclear deterrents, the dilapidated state of its military industrial base, and the erosion of strategic stability, some might conclude the problem is too hard to fix. It is not. The United States, in partnership with its allies and partners, has the capability to redress the situation. But it needs a new approach. That new approach must prioritize deterrence and refocus diplomacy on new challenges. It must adapt US deterrence strategy and posture to the new challenges of deterring two nuclear peer adversaries with revanchist aims. It must emphasize cooperation with allies and partners and competition with China and Russia, while remaining open to diplomacy, dialogue, and arms control when they are in the US interest. It must invest in the enablers of success. It must also recalibrate the measure of unilateral restraint that is in the US

interest. But it should remain strongly wedded to the judgment that systemic peace is at risk and with it the nuclear peace. The stakes are high, and US action is imperative.

Recommendations

1. *Signal the political commitment to maintaining strategic stability while forging a new strategy that prioritizes deterrence and refocuses diplomacy on new challenges.* The US Government should speak directly to the American people to earn their support on these matters; the government should speak honestly and transparently with as much declassified evidence as possible, conveying that urgent action is needed to keep the peace but that the situation is not hopeless if the United States and its allies and partners rise to the occasion.

2. *Set out a statement of the new military problem at the strategic nuclear and theater levels.* That statement should fully account for the role of nuclear coercion and conflict in adversary strategies. It should also integrate nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence.

3. Address four key hard power priorities.

    - *Ensure a robust strategic deterrent.* To do so, the United States should fully resource the nuclear modernization program of record; ensure short-term sustainment of the aging triad while the transition to modernized replacements is delayed, so that there is no loss of standing capability; ensure sustainment and modernization of the nuclear command-and-control system and revitalize the associated continuity of operations and continuity of government (COOP/COG) capabilities; make new investments in the accelerated renewal of production capabilities within the National Nuclear Security Administration's nuclear complex and ensure the future capacity to do more than just regenerate existing forces; and authorize studies of additional weapons concepts. The Department of Defense should also be directed to prepare to upload warheads that were downloaded under New START so that decision-makers have this option and can execute it if New START restraints lapse. If they do lapse, DoD should then proceed to do so.

    - *Strengthen regional deterrence.* To do so, the US should accelerate the nuclear variant of a sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) and mandate its delivery to the Department of Defense within five years and make the needed associated reforms in program implementation and oversight, accelerate deployment of deep precision strike non-nuclear systems, and rapidly and diligently pursue game-changing directed-energy defenses against regional missile threats.

- *Strengthen homeland defense*. To do so, the US should rapidly and diligently build out homeland cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic missile defenses and improve the resilience of critical homeland infrastructures to protect the nation against rogue nations and credible Chinese and Russian coercive threats.

- *Address the gap between the needed two-war strategy and the currently planned one-war force.* Without more robust deterrence of conventional war by non-nuclear means, including via elevated efforts by both the United States and—vitally—its allies, the United States will become increasingly reliant on nuclear threats. This reliance will become dangerous if US threats to employ its nuclear forces are not seen as credible.

  This is a lot to ask, and it raises the question of priorities. The unacceptable nuclear risk evident in current US strategic posture has a great deal to do with prior decisions to postpone and avoid investments in a modernized posture adapted to new circumstances. The resources needed in the era of unipolar peace cannot suffice in a world of adversarial multipolarity. Nuclear weapons pose the only standing threat to the existence of the United States. If we refuse to make the necessary investments to set things right, we do so at our great peril.

4. *Emphatically and urgently insist that allies and partners do more for deterrence.* A few already contribute significantly, and some have strengthened their contributions in recent years, but the majority still do not contribute at the levels that are needed and affordable. Since the Cold War, US allies, and in particular wealthy NATO allies, have been even slower than the United States to come to grips with the reality of the new and dangerous threat environment and invest in their defenses, instead choosing to count on the United States to make greater sacrifices in resources on their behalf. The United States should prevail upon allies and partners to make urgent, sustained investments in the capabilities that will be needed to resource this new division of labor, especially in the area of conventional forces. NATO should conduct a new Deterrence and Defense Posture Review to update thinking about the needed "appropriate mix" of capabilities and capacities and how to deliver them through improved burden sharing. This assessment should determine what is necessary to maintain conventional superiority over Russia even if the United States is engaged in a major theater conflict with China first. It should then be used by NATO leaders to tailor new investments to bolster key deterrence portfolios. With allies in East Asia, the United States should undertake parallel reviews and processes. With allies in both regions, the US should define and execute a new division of deterrence labor between and among the United States and its allies that frees the United States to better meet the challenges of a two-peer world.

5. *Refocus diplomatic engagement on new challenges*. The United States should emphasize deterrence-focused engagements with allies through the NATO High-Level Group, the Nuclear Consultative Group, and related venues. It should also persist in efforts with Moscow and Beijing to promote restraint and transparency but insist that restraint be reciprocal and prioritize urgent force investments that improve the United States' diplomatic leverage. The US should explore the new possibility of a renewal of dialogue with Moscow on strategic stability and the realm of the newly possible for future arms control; but be wary of dialogue that proves non-substantive and of arms control proposals that constrain the US ability to contend with China's rise or are designed to divide NATO. The US should also focus on creating incentives for Russia and China to seek the benefits of mutual reciprocal restraint and leverage the move toward a reinvigorated US deterrent posture into giving adversaries a renewed incentive to talk about negotiated restraint. Additionally, the US should reinvigorate the non-proliferation project. The US should also remain open to engaging with the advocates of Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and with the Global South, and to using track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues to advance mutual understanding.

6. *Take the needed first steps on the multiple long-term projects that are enablers of success.* The US should establish the necessary strategic focus and expect to demonstrate it regularly in the months and years ahead. It should rebuild the sources of defense innovation in the United States and with allies and partners and build and regularly tend to the needed executive-legislative partnership on the budget priorities noted above. The US must also make the case to the American people: explain the stakes, set out the course correction, and periodically explain progress and challenges.

Closing note: These key findings and recommendations are drawn from the more comprehensive strategy for stability elaborated later in the report. They are presented here in order to focus attention on those elements of the strategy that can be implemented *in the near term*. The situation is urgent and calls for immediate action—and these are the points of most immediate leverage.

The Fraying Nuclear Peace

Through the decades of the Cold War, strategic stability was at the center of US policy concern. This reflected the fact that the risks of a nuclear war were tangible and ever-present. In the first two decades after the Cold War, strategic stability was largely an afterthought as the perceived risk of nuclear conflict and rivalry nearly disappeared. But over the last decade, strategic stability has steadily regained policy salience and prompted increasing political concern.

This growing attention to strategic stability reflects mounting anxiety about the durability of the long nuclear peace.[9] For eight decades, nuclear weapons have not been used in warfare. Also in that long period, nuclear-armed powers have not fought major, direct wars against each other. Nor have they used military force for purposes of territorial expansion—that is, until Russia's wars against Ukraine in 2014 and since 2022. Although this has not been an altogether peaceful era in human history, this period has seen a dramatic decline in the number of deaths from warfare, in both absolute and per capita terms, relative to the long preceding era. It is in our collective interest to extend this peace and to ensure that the norm against the use of nuclear weapons remains robust.

The erosion of strategic stability is driven by many factors. We see the following as particularly important. First and most acute are President Putin's ambitions to seize the territory of neighboring states by force and to degrade US power and influence by coercing and blackmailing the United States. Second is President X's parallel ambition to dominate China's neighbors, including US allies and partners, and to build a nuclear force capable of threatening or extracting concessions from the United States. The third source of erosion is nuclear proliferation to US regional adversaries and their growing partnerships with Russia and China in pursuit of revisionist objectives. The fourth key driver is the erosion and collapse of the arms control regime. The fifth key driver is the erosion of the non-proliferation regime. The sixth key driver is rising concern among US allies and partners about the credibility and effectiveness of the deterrence protection extended to them by the United States (i.e., extended nuclear deterrence). A related factor is the prolonged unwillingness of many allies and partners to make adequate investments in their own defense—a habit that they acquired during the post–Cold War peace but which is proving dangerously hard to shake now that major geopolitical threats have arisen once more. The final key driver is the falling out among Washington, Moscow, and now Beijing on the meaning of strategic stability and on whether and how to try to restore and protect strategic stability. Each of these is explored below.

Putin's Turn to Confrontation

When Vladimir Putin rose to national leadership in 1999, he was widely welcomed as a pragmatist who would restore some discipline to Russia's chaotic economy and society and

as a man with whom it was possible to get business done. A decade later, it had become clear that he had an agenda that was fundamentally at odds with the interests of the United States—to rebuild a sphere of influence and control in ways reminiscent of tsarist imperialism—and is doing so in part by coercing and extorting the United States and its allies.

With wars in Chechnya and Georgia, he demonstrated his willingness to invade Russia's neighbors and suppress their populations. In a speech in Munich in 2007, he set out his antipathy to the "hyperpower" he said was "plunging the world into an abyss of conflict."[10] Upon annexing Crimea in 2014, he called for a world of "new rules or no rules."[11] By then he was well launched on a broadly constructed campaign to achieve his revisionist ambitions, including to set the conditions for success in direct military confrontation with NATO. He ramped up aggressive action aimed at undermining Western states, including aggressive interference in domestic political processes, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and covert operations, including lethal ones. He began multiple covert programs to develop banned and novel weapons of various kinds, violating but not withdrawing from existing treaty commitments (presumably in a bid to gain one-sided advantage on the assumption that the United States would remain bound by their terms). More recently, he has played the leading role in creating a new axis of powers with shared (though not identical) agendas to roll back US-backed regional security orders by establishing his "friendship without limits" with China, a new alliance with North Korea, and a new reciprocal defense–industrial partnership with Iran, and by undertaking his expeditionary misadventure in Syria.[12]

Russia's brutal war against Ukraine is the latest stage in this campaign. It serves as a vivid illustration of the extremes to which Putin is prepared to go to advance his agenda and of his propensity to both take risk and miscalculate in doing so. It affirms that he sees himself as a man of destiny, called by history to set aright injustices inflicted upon Russia and to restore imperial greatness.

But the Ukraine war is likely not the culmination of Russia's campaign. Whatever its future outcome, that war will likely leave unfulfilled Russia's ambition to claim territories and people it wrongly believes are rightfully Russia's.[13] Thus, he prepares for a more direct confrontation with NATO. We should expect increased reliance on nuclear weapons as the Russian military rebuilds (and perhaps thereafter). We should also expect Russian-generated military crises aimed at testing the collective resolve of the allies to defend themselves even if under nuclear threat. Such repeated probing and testing through ongoing provocative acts of greater and lesser severity is a central element in Russia's coercive bargaining playbook. President Putin may even contemplate incursions aimed at demonstrating the vulnerability of individual US allies to Russian coercion or more direct combat aimed at seizing and holding some coveted territory.

This is a troubling prospect. Russia has undertaken a "fundamental reappraisal of all defense concepts."[14] Its new way of regional war is built on the principles of multi-domain coercion and

limited escalation. That way of war involves the active use of nuclear threats and displays, and steps to lower the nuclear threshold to gain leverage over outside actors. Reportedly, the war in Ukraine is already an object of study among Russian military experts for lessons about how to make that coercion even more effective.[15]

China's Choice for Rivalry

China has followed a trajectory similar to Russia's—but not identical. President Xi sees himself as called by destiny—in this case, to fulfill what Xi calls the "China Dream." That dream involves a "national rejuvenation" that restores for China the global role and status that it imagines to be its ancient birthright. As articulated by Xi, part of that dream is the full recovery of sovereignty over territories lost to it during the "century of humiliation"; accordingly, Xi has promised the recovery of Taiwan on his watch. But his ambition doesn't stop there. Xi is a creation of the political party that he leads, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has long had the ambition to restore China to its "rightful place" at the center of the world stage by replacing the United States as the dominant world power.[16]

Like Russia, China is preparing for direct, armed confrontation with the United States and its allies and partners. China's leadership, through its efforts to improve and expand all the elements of comprehensive national power, is pursuing a multi-faceted approach and undertaking a long-running military modernization program. This includes a dramatic expansion and diversification of its nuclear arsenal, following Xi's commitment to "a strong option of strategic deterrence."[17] But Chinese leaders are complementing the military element with improvements in China's economic, diplomatic, financial, scientific, and technical capabilities. The leadership of the CCP strives to ensure that all these elements work in tandem, complementing each other, as a managed complex system strategy.

Thus far, Xi has not resorted to the overt use of military force, unlike Putin. However, under Xi, China has become increasingly belligerent toward the United States across multiple domains, including aggressive espionage, penetrations of US airspace and confrontational behavior toward US vessels at sea, coercive practices toward US companies, and covert support for the flow of illicit fentanyl into the United States.[18] It has made aggressive moves toward US treaty allies Japan and the Philippines and US partner India. China has also telegraphed its preparedness to blockade and possibly invade democratic Taiwan.

Also, unlike Russia, China's economy and domestic stability depend significantly on access to Western markets and technology. Beijing is also less willing today than Moscow to provide technical assistance to proliferators.

Nuclear Proliferation to US Regional Adversaries

The nuclear peace is also jeopardized by the proliferation of nuclear weapons to regional powers hostile to the United States and its alliances and interests. North Korea's move across the nuclear threshold in 2006 and its fielding of a small but growing nuclear force pose a significant danger to the US homeland and an existential threat to US allies in Northeast Asia. Kim Jong Un's commitment to a rapid buildup of tactical nuclear weapons foreshadows more risk to come, especially as he touts "an unexpected second purpose" driving future force requirements. Kim has explained as follows:

> The fundamental mission of our nuclear forces is to deter war. But our nukes can never be confined to the single mission of war deterrent at a time when a situation we are not desirous of at all is created on the land. If any forces try to violate the fundamental interests of our state, our nuclear force will have to decisively accomplish its unexpected second mission.[19]

Iran's move to consolidate its position as a threshold state with the potential to move to a weaponized deterrent quickly adds new nuclear risk to the Middle East. Preventing it from crossing the threshold remains an urgent priority. Failure to do so would expose US ally Israel to an existential threat and generate new pressures on others in the region to seek nuclear deterrents of their own and undermine the effectiveness of non-proliferation norms everywhere. This could unleash a cascade of proliferation in and perhaps even beyond the region.

Recalling past aid by North Korea to the Syrian nuclear weapons program, we must worry also about the possibility that leaders in Pyongyang or Tehran might see strategic benefit in assisting others to proliferate or simply in selling them nuclear weapons. In recent years, Russia has also proven to be a proliferation risk, with reports of it providing technology to the nuclear and missile programs of North Korea and Iran.[20]

The emerging patterns of political and military cooperation among regional and major power challengers adds complexity and danger to this landscape. In peacetime competition, this cooperation helps them to accelerate capability development. In crisis and war, it threatens to open up a multi-front conflict that would sorely stretch US military resources and test US-backed alliances, and that could escalate into a nuclear confrontation that could imperil the existence of the United States.

The Collapse of Arms Control

The robust and comprehensive web of treaties and informal measures aimed at reducing military dangers that was constructed during the Cold War and expanded upon in the years

that followed has collapsed. More precisely, it has been undermined and poisoned by Putin's sense of grievance against and antagonism to the West (his belief that these agreements were imposed on Russia in its moment of historic weakness in a bid to perpetuate its weakness), by his desire to seize for Russia a restored imperial domain, and by the belligerence born of these beliefs. Russia has violated its commitments under the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Treaty on Open Skies, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Biological Weapons Convention, and now apparently also the Outer Space Treaty.[21] It has violated its own promises on nuclear testing. It has also illegally suspended its participation in the New START Treaty. These behaviors align with many other actions by the Putin regime that fall well outside of long-standing norms of legality and morality. These include, for example, the illicit use of chemical weapons, global campaigns of assassination and sabotage, and wartime atrocities.

In sum, while the United States has sought to preserve these treaties, create new ones, and provide leadership in restraint by example, Russia has lived up—or down—to Putin's "no rules" dictum.

At the same time, China has been unwilling to join in nuclear arms control or, even more fundamentally, to sustain dialogue on nuclear topics. Even as its forces have grown, it has stuck to its lack of transparency and increasingly empty claims that it still adheres to a policy of no-first use of nuclear weapons. It has also stuck to its traditional view that the United States uses arms control as a tool "to restrict others while developing its own capabilities." From Beijing's perspective, such restrictions are unacceptable because the "century of humiliation … has taught China that if you fall behind you get beaten up."[22]

The Erosion of the Non-proliferation Regime

At the same time, the prospects for the non-proliferation regime have dimmed dramatically. It is useful to recall that, not so very long ago, they looked bright. With the end of the Cold War, new things became possible in the 1990s. In 1995, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was renewed and extended indefinitely. The Chemical Weapons Convention was agreed and entered into force in 1997. The Biological Weapons Convention was strengthened by a special conference in 1994. Over 25 years, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program dismantled more than 2,500 nuclear delivery systems in the former Soviet states and thus helped lead to the deactivation of thousands of warheads. The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council repeatedly came together to address threats to the peace posed by proliferation in Iraq and elsewhere.

Multiple subsequent developments, however, have put matters on a different trajectory. The existing non-proliferation regime has proven inadequate to restrain the nuclear programs

of North Korea and Iran (and of India and Pakistan). The bid to universalize membership has faltered. A powerful camp has emerged that is willing to trade a strong non-proliferation regime for a weak and incomplete disarmament regime in the form of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—one that, moreover, threatens to undermine the US extended nuclear deterrence that has helped not just deter aggression but also reduce proliferation pressures for the last half century. Russia and China have increased the public visibility and role of nuclear weapons and are building up and diversifying their arsenals (with little or no substantive international rebuke). At the same time, mounting concerns about climate change have fueled renewed interest in the commercial uses of nuclear energy, the incautious spread of which could give more countries more proliferation options. Moreover, Russia has put its interest in undermining the US-backed order ahead of its responsibilities as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and violated the sanctions it voted to impose against North Korea and Iran.

New Challenges to US Extended Nuclear Deterrence

The nuclear protection provided by the United States to its allies and partners is a significant factor in its overall deterrence strategy. It is also an essential instrument of non-proliferation, as many recipients of these US assurances have the technical ability to produce nuclear weapons of their own and would likely feel the need to do so if they perceived a threat that the United States was incapable or unwilling to deter. US allies and partners live in the crosshairs of our rivals; after all, their future political allegiance—or in some cases, their very territory—is the prize for which those rivals compete. Leaders of many US allies and partners have refused to come to terms with this fact and have consistently engaged with the very adversaries against which they seek US protection while woefully underinvesting in their own defenses.

In the 2000s and early 2010s, a few allies were concerned that the United States might choose not to come to their defense in crisis and war because of new nuclear risks it would face in doing so from regional challengers like North Korea and Iran. US homeland missile defenses were designed to mitigate this “decoupling” concern by reassuring allies that the United States could defend against North Korean strikes and would come to allies’ defense, notwithstanding Pyongyang’s efforts to hold the American homeland at risk.

Today, more allies are concerned, and their concerns are more wide-ranging due to a combination of increased adversary capabilities and the lagging capabilities of the United States and allies themselves. The decoupling concern remains and has been amplified by North Korea’s steady progress in deploying a small nuclear force and the slow progress of the United States in developing its homeland missile defense to stay ahead of regional threats. Some allies also worry about their vulnerability to coercive missile threats from Russia and/or China.

But today's concerns go well beyond those associated with the homeland vulnerability of the United States. Allies in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific are debating with growing intensity whether the US extended nuclear deterrent remains fit for purpose. After all, it is largely a legacy of force structure decisions made in the immediate wake of the Cold War. These included the decisions to withdraw from overseas (and thereafter, for the most part, to dismantle) the nuclear weapons that had been forward deployed in support of US allies. There was an exception: a small number of weapons were left in Europe—a number then deemed sufficient to sustain NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements. For extended deterrence protection of US allies, the choice was made to rely instead on US strategic systems. This was decided in an environment in which major power war was seen as extremely unlikely. In the interim, the United States has modernized, but not expanded, this small legacy force deployed in Europe. Allies ask how a posture conceived in 1991 as great power threats were collapsing can be effective in preventing regional nuclear war following major improvements by Russia, China, and North Korea to their capabilities for waging both nuclear and conventional war at the theater level, and in a context of ascendant Russian and Chinese revisionism. They worry also that US nuclear power projection assets would be too few if the United States were presented with simultaneous crises in separate regions.

The Falling Out Over Strategic Stability

At various times in the Cold War, Washington and Moscow cooperated, sometimes strongly and sometimes not, to protect what they understood to be a shared interest in stable strategic relations. That perception of shared interest had its roots in the nuclear experience of the early Cold War. The crises over Berlin in 1960 and Cuba in 1962 brought home the risk that armed confrontation could readily erupt in nuclear escalation. The subsequent dramatic buildup of nuclear forces by both sides brought home the risk that competition might result in pressures to exploit fleeting advantages. Accordingly, strategic stability came to be equated with crisis stability, arms race stability, and the condition of mutual assured destruction.[23] In support of their cooperation for strategic stability, Washington and Moscow gradually built and sustained an ongoing dialogue on matters of shared interest and allowed the requisite transparency to support it.

After the Cold War, Washington sought to extend this cooperation with Moscow and build it with Beijing. On both counts, Washington has been sorely disappointed.

A good start was made with the joint US-Russian statement on strategic stability in 1990. But a decade later, perspectives had shifted. Early in his tenure as Russian president, Vladimir Putin came to see strategic stability—in the sense that we mean it in this report—as undesirable, and as impeding his ambitions for a Russian geopolitical resurgence. These ambitions were inconsistent with the unipolar world order and a US strategy aimed at enlargement of the

community of democracies and their protection through an expanding web of alliances. And at a certain point, it became clear that Xi had also come to have much the same view of strategic stability.

- In 2007, as already noted, Putin had characterized the United States as a "hyperpower plunging the world into an abyss of conflict."

- In 2009 and 2010, he was not willing to join with the United States in making much deeper cuts to nuclear arsenals.

- In 2014, he expressed his opposition to the "infamous policy of containment" and explained the need to "snap back hard."[24]

- In 2016, he joined with Xi in characterizing US thinking on strategic stability as "outdated" and arguing that "the international community should regard strategic stability from a wider angle."[25]

- In 2020 and 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov sketched out a "new security equation" that identified complex stability interdependencies across multiple domains.[26]

- In January 2022, even while falsely promising that Russia would not "attack, raid[,] or invade Ukraine" (which Russia did shortly thereafter), Deputy Foreign Ministry Sergei Ryabkov stated that Russia continues to have its traditional concerns about developments in the US strategic posture that may call into question the effectiveness of Russia's nuclear deterrent but that these have become "tertiary, even peripheral" to its overriding concerns about the instabilities it associates with a US-centric world order.[27] In February 2022, Presidents Putin and Xi issued a joint statement in which they argued that "certain [s]tates, military and political alliances and coalitions seek to obtain, directly or indirectly, unilateral military advantages to the detriment of the security of others."[28]

- Later in 2022, Putin characterized the West as being run by "Satanic" forces determined to humiliate and destroy Russia.[29]

- In 2023, Ryabkov responded to a statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that "we are ready to engage without waiting to resolve all of our bilateral differences" with the statement that "the principle of compartmentalization is unacceptable … given destabilizing and hostile US behavior."[30]

This falling out has brought the United States to a destination it did not seek. Presidents Putin and Xi do not actually seem to ***want*** strategic stability. Rather, they seem to want to foster

instability so as to leverage it for geopolitical advantage. After all, they seem to believe that an America that is safe and secure is a danger to them—politically, as well as militarily.

Conclusion

Any one of these seven factors would be enough to generate concern. In combination, they should generate real alarm. The acceleration of these negative changes should add urgency to alarm. The situation calls for something significant from the United States and from others committed to order, stability, and peace, nuclear and otherwise.

The US Policy Crossroads

US nuclear policy is designed to address many objectives: deterrence, assurance, strategic stability, and risk reduction chief among them. Our focus here is on strategic stability, given its cross-cutting impacts on other objectives. In our judgment, the legacy US strategy for stability has become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

A sound strategy must be built on sound concepts. As noted above, the terms commonly used in US expert circles are products of their time and of the particular challenges faced by decision-makers in the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the meanings of "stabilizing" and "destabilizing" are diluted when they are used as substitutes for "things I've done" and "things you've done that I don't like." This is not a new problem. Nearly 40 years ago, one leading expert opined that "stability is a vogue word which in common parlance has become meaningless."[31] But in a today's nuclear context, as risks are rising, we have an important stake in clearly identifying and understanding the sources of danger.

Strategic stability is often conceived as a strategy or a policy. It is neither. It is a condition. It is a condition of the competition between two or more adversaries in peacetime, crisis, and war.

- "Stability" is often conceived as synonymous with "static." It is not. Stability is an attribute of a dynamic system. A stable condition has a "tendency to persist"[32] in a dynamic context because it is "reasonably secure against shocks, alarms, and perturbations."[33]

- "Strategic" is often conceived as synonymous with "nuclear." It is not. To be sure, it has a significant nuclear connotation, and not just to intercontinental-range systems. But it encompasses all of the most consequential military and other influences on the calculus of the benefits, costs, and risks of different courses of action all across the continuum of conflict.

- "Strategic instability" equates with a condition in which nuclear dangers and the likelihood of direct conflict between nuclear-armed adversaries are growing because risks are not being eliminated, reduced, or managed (perhaps simply because they are unmanageable). The principal source of such instability would be success by one side in stripping away the other's confidence in its capacity for assured retaliation.

- "Strategic stability" equates with a condition in which potential nuclear dangers are not being realized because risks are being managed, reduced, or eliminated. It is also a condition in which the nuclear armed powers remain persuaded that the costs of using military force against each other (or their allies) outweigh the benefits. Even where the capability for retaliation remains assured, stability could nonetheless erode as a result of

a capability mismatch at the theater level that an aggressor then seeks to exploit for its coercive or warfighting benefit.

With this as context, we recommend adoption of the following as an updated definition:

> *Strategic stability is a condition in which the political relations and military balance between states that pose an existential threat to each other are such that they perceive neither a compelling need nor a viable opportunity to advance their interests at the expense of the vital interests of the other through the use of military force, and especially nuclear weapons.*

This set of concepts helps to capture the salient features of strategic stability and instability in today's security environment. In relations with Russia and China, strategic stability is about more than military balances of power or operational strategic advantage; political context matters as well. Both potential adversaries prepare for conflicts with US-led alliances that may put US vital interests at risk. Both want the United States to believe that they are well prepared to defend and advance their national interests through the use of military force, and Russia is actively engaged in such aggression.

To be sure, there are some concerning developments in their military postures that do not rise to the level of strategically consequential perturbations. That Russia and China are modernizing their nuclear forces is not in itself destabilizing. But the expansion and adaptation of those forces to new circumstances, not to mention the use of nuclear saber-rattling in support of regional territorial ambitions, is more troubling at a time of no comparable expansion or adaptation by the United States. Most troubling of all is the development by Russia and China of theories of victory in regional wars against US alliances and their progress in fielding the enabling military capabilities. These theories of victory aim to leverage overmatching capabilities vis-à-vis the United States in theater-range nuclear forces and coercive bargaining campaigns. The enabling military capabilities include Russia's pursuit of "a nuclear scalpel for every military problem in Europe" and of myriad novel nuclear delivery systems and China's pursuit of a rapid and unexplained buildup of its strategic forces and dual-capable theater systems in the context of its obvious preparations for all of the possible dimensions of war with the United States over Taiwan.[34] These shifting balances of nuclear power are all the more concerning given the hostility in Moscow and Beijing to US-backed regional security orders and US alliances.

This is not to argue that concepts developed in the Cold War have lost all of their relevance in the new security environment. As noted above, with the Berlin and Cuban crises of 1960 and 1962, leaders learned the need to guard against the possibility that crises will become more unstable because one side perceives itself as vulnerable to a crippling first strike. Leaders also learned to guard against the possibility that one side will try to gain some force structure

advantage over the other and exploit it to seize and try to hold a prize of some kind. These concerns about crisis and arms race stability will remain as long as nuclear weapons remain.[35]

These stability concerns manifest themselves in specific new threats to the United States and its allies and partners. We face an increased risk of regional wars with a nuclear dimension aimed at coercion and intimidation. The United States faces an increased risk of strategic attack on its homeland, whether nuclear or conventional. The United States and its allies and partners face a new risk of simultaneous (or nearly so) aggression by two major power, near-peer adversaries. The United States faces an increased risk that major power rivals may believe it is possible for them to sprint to some new strategic advantage and use that advantage to seize and hold some territory or domain of interest. The world as a whole faces a growing risk of the collapse of the nuclear order that was slowly assembled in the first few decades of the nuclear era.

This catalogue suggests that nuclear risks are both high and rising. In our judgment, they are rising but not yet unmanageably high. There is time for action—but much time has been lost, along with some important military advantages once enjoyed by what once was the world's only superpower.

The Legacy Strategy for Stability

In the decades since the Cold War, US policy for strategic stability has been on a fairly steady course, mixing diplomatic engagement and deterrence. Presidents of both political parties have sought to safeguard strategic stability in relations with Russia and China, sustain reductions and formal arms control with Russia, continue dialogue on strategic stability with Russia, build dialogue and transparency with China, ensure a balance of conventional forces in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific sufficient for deterrence purposes, and modernize US nuclear forces only to the extent necessary to avoid unilateral disarmament.

Most have also sought to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in US defense strategy and have pursued numerical reductions as well. Each new administration has arrived with fresh concerns about the eroding political relationship with Russia and fresh confidence that shared interests in strategic stability could provide practical opportunities to turn the situation around. Most have also hoped that the regimes in Russia and China would relax and liberalize if only the United States and its allies and partners continued to show unreciprocated unilateral restraint and support those powers' integration into the world economy. In short, they have prioritized engagement over deterrence and dialogue over defense.

Taking Stock

These earnest hopes have gone unrequited and those ambitions unfulfilled. US attempts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy have been ignored and, in fact, exploited. Washington's calls for substantive, sustained, and high-level dialogue on strategic stability with both Moscow and Beijing have gone largely unheeded. Those calls have been repeated and numerous. The occasional rare exchange has done nothing to reveal shared interests in strategic stability or to lay the foundation for follow-on collaboration. The effort to lead by example in nuclear restraint has failed to generate the desired restraint by others, and indeed the United States' adversaries have tried to leverage and weaponize its commitment to such restraint for coercive bargaining purposes. Nor have Russia and China liberalized; to the contrary, their domestic politics have grown steadily more authoritarian over most of the post-Cold War period, at the same time that their geopolitical ambitions have become ever more openly hostile. Yet US political leaders, and the experts who advise them, have been reluctant to accept that strategic stability is no longer perceived in Moscow or Beijing as a shared interest. Diplomats have been slow to accept that the pursuit of dialogue in the context of continued US restraint has failed to generate the needed political will among US adversaries to cooperate.

At the same time, US defense planners have been slow to recognize the warning signs of mounting difficulty in ensuring the effectiveness of deterrence. For a long time, the war on terrorism was a priority and little was done, even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, to renew America's capacity to deter a major power or prepare for a possible future need to do so. In the nuclear realm, the United States has pursued a combination of unilateral and reciprocal restraint with a modernization plan aimed merely at replacing aging capabilities rather than adapting or providing complementary systems to bolster deterrence in response to the changes its nuclear-armed adversaries have been making. In retrospect, we can see that the United States has been negligent in preserving and adapting a strong nuclear deterrent.

Here we align ourselves with the 2024 report of the Commission on the National Defense Strategy.[36] Over the last three decades, US leaders have accepted many new nuclear risks, some knowingly but many not. Mere replacement of legacy 20th century weapons, especially at a greatly diminished scale, does not suffice for 21st century purposes. Especially concerning is that the strategic dimension of regional wars against nuclear-armed rivals remains under appreciated by US military planners.

Here we also align ourselves with the 2023 report of the Strategic Posture Commission.[37] The United States has put itself in a weak position to respond with new military capabilities, especially in the nuclear weapons arena. While the strategic nuclear forces of the United States are presently fit for purpose, they are "not sufficient to meet the new threats posed by Russia and China." Moreover, the theater force is "not fit for purpose" and will become even

less so in the period ahead. Thus, the nuclear modernization program of record is indeed necessary but not sufficient to preserve US national security.

In addition, although the nuclear modernization Program of Record provides for the modernization of almost all major elements of the National Nuclear Security Administration's nuclear weapons design and production infrastructure, the planned capacity of that future infrastructure will be insufficient to meet the likely requirement for a larger deployed strategic and theater nuclear force to address the two nuclear peer threat environment in the mid-to- late 2030s or to regenerate a "hedge" capability if and when the United States uploads warheads from its current reserve stockpile. This must be addressed with a sense of urgency.

In short, the US response to the new strategic environment has been tardy and unfocused. And its legacy strategy has been proven inadequate to the new circumstances.

In our view, this latter judgment is now widely shared. As then-national security advisor Jake Sullivan stated in 2023, "there are very deep cracks in the foundation" of the US strategy for nuclear security. He went on to call for "a more competitive approach."[38] The absence of such an approach has contributed to the imbalances and instabilities that have emerged.

Accordingly, US policy now stands at a critical turning point. There is no going back to the legacy approach. The effort to cooperate with Russia and China to identify and safeguard shared interests in strategic stability has come to naught—a situation that cannot be expected to change soon. Nuclear risks are rising. Rather than go backward, the United States must go forward to a new approach.

Toward a New Strategy for Strategic Stability

The design of a new strategy must begin with first principles. We offer seven.

First, the United States must secure its interests in strategic stability in the absence of cooperation with Russia and China—and in the face of their cooperation with each other to threaten the United States and its allies. While it should remain open to a renewal of cooperation in the future, and diplomatic engagement with nuclear adversaries should be welcomed, US strategy should not rely on the hope that this will happen any time soon without a major change in strategy.

Second, restoration of strategic stability is one thing and management of instability is another. US policy must address both objectives.

Third, Russia and China present similar but not identical problems for strategic stability. North Korea presents yet another problem, Iran potentially a fourth, and possible *collaboration* between these states yet another set of challenges. US strategy must account for both the similarities and the differences among these problems, and for the range of possible combinations.

Fourth, allies and alliances should be critical enablers of success for US strategy, but some allies remain unwilling to make the necessary investments in their own defenses for that purpose. Toward that end, US diplomatic engagement must focus on convincing allies to do more where they remain unwilling to do so, and to engage allies more fully than before in efforts to promote and protect strategic stability. Restoring and protecting strategic stability is in the interest of US allies just as it is in the interest of the United States, and all must rise to the moment for the sake of their national sovereignty, freedom, security, and prosperity.

Fifth, advantages lost might not be regained, but new advantages can be built. US strategy must focus on building new advantages while trying to reverse or at least slow the loss of old ones.

Sixth, look for synergies. US efforts to prioritize deterrence and refocus diplomacy offer many.

Seventh, as the erosion of strategic stability is accelerating, the United States must respond with urgency. This puts a premium on steps that can be taken quickly to signal to friend and foe alike a change of US policy course and thereby buttress both assurance and deterrence. But the United States must also begin the important work of building and assuring sustained support for the long-term and costly efforts that will be needed to ensure enduring solutions to these challenges.

Elements of a New Strategy for Stability

The United States needs to recognize the need for change, the opportunity for change, and the direction of necessary change. The situation is urgent. The stakes are rising. A more competitive approach to restore strategic stability is needed. Its key tenets should be: prioritize deterrence, refocus diplomacy, and bolster the enablers of success.

Prioritize Deterrence

1. *Urgently address the dangerous weaknesses in theater nuclear deterrence in both Europe and Asia.* The US extended nuclear deterrent is not currently fit for purpose and will become less so, especially as demands on it grow. Both quantitative and qualitative adjustments to the US nuclear umbrella are needed. These may include accelerated development of the SLCM-N, the early deployment in Europe of an air delivered long-range stand-off weapon capable of penetrating advanced integrated air and missile defenses, an increase in the number of allies participating in NATO's nuclear deterrence mission, and continued progress in improving conventional-nuclear integration through planning and exercises. The Departments of Defense and Energy should be directed to cut in half the projected ten-year timeframe for the delivery of SLCM-N and be given the needed resources to make this so. The United States should work with allies in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific to determine whether additional capabilities are needed. The Department of Defense should also ensure that the B21 fleet is able to play a strong supporting role for regional nuclear deterrence and that decisions about the number of B21s are adjusted to meet the growing needs of a two nuclear peer environment.

2. *Ensure that modernization of strategic nuclear forces delivers a result that is credible and effective against future threats, not past ones.* The strategic deterrent is currently fit for purpose but will become less so over the decade ahead. More and/or different weapons will be needed in the deployed force to address two peer adversaries simultaneously; the debate over precisely how many more weapons will be needed has obscured this basic fact. Delays in the modernization program of record may result in a gap if legacy forces age out before their replacements are ready; investments are needed to ensure necessary sustainment of existing systems until they can be replaced. A credible strategic deterrent also requires a secure and survivable command-and-control system and associated COOP/COG capabilities. These too require sustained long-term modernization. In the longer term, assured retaliation can also be guaranteed by continued improvements to the ability to penetrate adversary missile defenses and by enhanced force survivability; in this regard, the United States should work toward a more survivable bomber leg and then a more survivable ICBM leg (silo-based ICBMs are necessary but not sufficient). This will also help to reduce the pressures to move in time of crisis and war to a launch-under-attack posture.

3. *Accelerate efforts to strengthen the non-nuclear deterrence tool kit.* This has been a priority for the last five presidential administrations and should remain a priority as the contributions to deterrence and defense are so direct and visible. At the regional level, non-nuclear means include deep precision non-nuclear strike, theater missile defense, improved resilience of critical infrastructure, and continued steps to promote conventional-nuclear integration in planning and operations. At the strategic level of war, offense, defense, and resilience all require attention. The United States needs a long-range hypersonic conventional strike capability in the field. It urgently needs a homeland missile defense posture that is effective against ballistic, cruise, and hypersonic missile threats and is scaled to stay ahead of North Korean and Iranian threats and to negate coercive strikes from China and Russia. The resilience of critical national infrastructures also requires continued urgent attention. In each of these areas, important progress is already being made. But the pace of improvement is too slow relative to the requirements of deterrence in the new context.

4. *Address the erosion of the balance of conventional forces in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific.* The best way to prevent nuclear war is to prevent the conventional wars from which nuclear escalation may occur. In today's security environment, this means deterring adversaries from starting wars against US allies or partners. Yet over the last two decades, the conventional balance of power has eroded as US forces have aged and shrunk, as allies have neglected defense investments, and as China and Russia have modernized and adapted their forces to enable their new ways of war. The Ukraine war has also vividly illuminated the challenges of fighting and winning a long war of attrition. Moreover, the new possibility that two or more nuclear-armed rivals may collude to instigate simultaneous or sequential militarized crises implies that the United States needs to prepare for a two-war contingency with increased US, allied, and partner investments. Failure to address this two-war problem with conventional force expansion and improvements will force us to increase reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional inferiority in a second theater.

5. *Ask more of allies for deterrence (and diplomacy too, as described below).* Allies have a lot to contribute, and some are making necessary and significant investments and are eager for deeper engagement, but some have underinvested for too long in the needed capabilities despite repeated warnings and even demands by American presidents and NATO secretaries-general. The US Government should prevail upon reluctant allies and partners to make urgent, sustained investments in the capabilities that are needed for this new division of labor. NATO should conduct a new Deterrence and Defense Posture Review to update thinking about the needed "appropriate mix" of capabilities and capacities to address the Russia threat in the event that the United States is already engaged in a major theater conflict in Asia. Similar reviews should be conducted with allies

in the Indo-Pacific. In both Europe and Asia, a new division of deterrence labor needs to be defined—one that leverages allied advantages to strengthen deterrence and frees the United States to better meet the challenges of a two-peer world.

6. *Renew nuclear production capacities.* Those capacities were given up in the 1990s as part of the peace dividend. Despite repeated high-level commitments by multiple administrations to a more agile weapons complex as a hedge against adverse changes in the security environment that might require additional or different nuclear capabilities, little was done, and the United States has continued to rely solely on an aging arsenal of reserve warheads as its hedge. Some capacities to produce warheads and their components are now being restored to enable the current nuclear modernization program. But these are not designed to enable increased production in response to future new requirements for more deployed weapons to address the two-peer threat. Increasing US warhead production capacity is a fundamental enabler of a more competitive approach. The weapons design and production capacities of the National Nuclear Security Administration need to be expanded in order to meet the requirements of fielding and supporting larger deployed strategic and theater nuclear forces, and of ensuring a sufficient hedge against future technical, geopolitical, operational, and programmatic requirements. To be clear: we are not arguing for immediately adding more nuclear weapons to the US nuclear arsenal beyond those that can be uploaded from storage. Rather, we are arguing for having the means to do so if current trends continue so that policymakers have the necessary options. Such steps will not only allow the United States to better meet its deterrence and security requirements but also help to incentivize arms control by signaling to US adversaries that having an arms race with the United States is not in their interest. Absent additional development and production capabilities, the United States risks sending them the message that they might be able to "win" such a race.

Refocus Diplomacy

7. *Prioritize diplomatic engagements with allies on strengthening deterrence.* The recommended efforts to accelerate capability development with allies, and to work toward a new division of deterrence labor between and among the United States and its allies and partners, require sustained and high-level political engagements. These efforts should build on existing collaborations with US allies and partners aimed at adapting deterrence to new purposes and in which the Department of State and allied foreign ministries play a central role. Allies should be emphatically encouraged to increase investment in military capabilities and to more directly and frequently express their assessments about the pressing threats to strategic stability posed by Russia and China and about those powers' provocative behaviors, military and otherwise.

8. *Pursue nuclear transparency measures with Russia.* It is important to try to seize the

opportunity presented by the renewal of high-level diplomacy between Washington and Moscow. But the United States should keep expectations appropriately low and prepare for failure. The US also needs to be explicit about the fact that China's rapidly increasing strategic forces impact the ability of the United States to agree with Russia on new limits or further reductions. It should not put on hold investments in deterrence while waiting for the oft hoped for breakthrough with Moscow. If that happy result occurs, then investments for deterrence can be re-tailored for the new circumstance if needed.

9. *Pursue strategic dialogue with China*. *But set expectations low*. The United States needs to prepare for rejection—or for the possibility of an exchange of views that is neither sustained, substantive, nor high level.

10. *Do the needed new analysis of emerging forms of competition with Russia and China to identify areas of possible future cooperation to mitigate shared risks*. In our judgment, the new forms of competition remain poorly understood. The United States cannot identify possible shared interests without understanding its interests more generally.

11. *Continue efforts to reinvigorate the non-proliferation project.* This requires first and foremost a sustained effort to exercise leadership within the NPT. Such leadership is not possible without directly challenging Moscow's malfeasance vis-à-vis North Korea and Iran and China's dramatic build-up and failures on transparency. Reinvigoration also requires more direct engagement with the advocates of the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Toward this end, US diplomats should directly engage the Global South to make the case on new dangers and the new strategy, and to convey the view that states within the Global South are condoning and enabling challengers to nuclear order and thereby bringing closer a nuclear jungle that will ultimately threaten their own security as well.

Bolster the Enablers of Success

12. *Sustain strategic focus over four years and beyond.* History suggests that such focus is easily lost. History also suggests that without it the desired changes will not be implemented or effective. As a starting point toward this end, the new stability strategy should be embedded in the cycle of strategy and presidential guidance. In follow up, the Congress should use regular hearings to ask the right questions about progress and barriers to success.

13. *Build and sustain executive-legislative partnership on this strategy.* Bipartisanship is essential to continuity for the long term, both in terms of policy continuity and sustained resourcing. It results only when efforts are made on both sides of the aisle to create the necessary conditions.

14. *Make the case publicly and repeatedly—to the American public, to allies, and to adversaries.* US officials should explain frankly what's at stake for the United States and the threats to US interests. They need to signal confidence in the ability of the United States to meet these challenges and remain safe and secure—provided that it makes urgent and consequential course corrections. They also need to signal the essential role played by allies and partners overseas, and the need for them to also do much more. While signaling determination and resolve, US officials should tell the American people that it will be expensive but that the United States cannot have peace on the cheap in an era of intensifying nuclear rivalry.

15. *Ramp up efforts to out-think and out-innovate the United States' adversaries.* In the 1990s, as part of the peace dividend, US policymakers retired many of the capabilities and capacities needed for security in a world of nuclear rivalry. In the interim, the challenges of such a world have grown more numerous and complex. Yet the United States has done little to recreate or build anew the needed institutional and human capital assets. This has a price. There is a clear mismatch between adversaries' well-developed theories of victory in coercion, bargaining, and war and the legacy US approaches largely inherited from the Cold War and the unipolar era. Left confident in their theories, adversaries may see reason to put them to the test. The result could be strategic surprise for the United States and a failure of deterrence, whether of the kind experienced at Pearl Harbor (unexpected armed confrontation) or Munich (appeasement and encouragement of an aggressor).

16. *Ramp up efforts to spur military innovation through the application of advanced technologies.* As is obvious to all, we are in the midst of a major technological revolution. Less obvious is that the United States is locked in a competition to gain the disruptive military benefits of novel technologies while denying those benefits to its adversaries. Success in this competition requires new forms of partnerships between the public and private sectors, the military and commercial sectors, and academe. Allies and partners should also be included from the start—and shared regulatory approaches to emerging technologies should be crafted with the aim of advancing the goal of renewed strategic advantage. With strategic foresight, the United States may be able to reap important new benefits for deterrence, assurance, defense, and stability and avoid costly strategic surprise from unexpected or preventable adversary innovations.

17. *In the development of the next strategic posture, rethink unilateral restraint.* In the past, unilateral restraint has played a central role in the US strategy for stability, most recently as part of "leadership by example" for arms control. For example, the United States has limited its homeland missile defenses to the objective of staying ahead of rogue state threats so as not to jeopardize strategic stability with Russia and China. But it is abundantly clear that leadership by example in this regard has failed to incentivize restraint by others; on the

contrary, it may have been interpreted as weakness and thus also been provocative and counterproductive. A more competitive strategy entails more intense competition and thus less restraint. We have thus advocated here for less nuclear restraint, less missile defense restraint, and less conventional strike restraint. A more comprehensive and strategic approach is sorely needed, one that strengthens deterrence in pursuit of a durable peace.

Closing Observations on the Strategy

Our recommended strategy is intended to be synergistic in its effects. By prioritizing deterrence, we hope not just to address weaknesses in the US military posture, but also to create the incentives for Moscow and Beijing to reengage with diplomacy and pursue cooperative measures to reduce dangers. By re-focusing diplomacy, we hope not just to shift the focus of cooperation from adversaries to partners, but also to strengthen messaging for deterrence and assurance. By emphasizing long-term enablers, we hope to give policymakers the tools they will need to accelerate progress in the years ahead on deterrence and diplomacy.

Our recommendation to prioritize deterrence is based on our recognition that the avoidance of conventional or nuclear war is far less expensive than waging such conflict. However, we also recognize that the United States' capability and will to successfully wage conventional and nuclear war is not only a prerequisite for deterrence, but also essential to the defense of US vital interests if deterrence fails despite the United States' best efforts. We expect that the risk of deterrence failure can be lowered through careful capability development, refocused diplomacy, and well-crafted strategic messaging—which we have recommended here. But our recommendations would also enhance the United States' ability to defend its vital interests and those of its allies and partners if deterrence does fail.

We are mindful also that diplomacy may fail (again). Moscow and Beijing may choose not to return to the negotiating table and may instead choose to pursue new and even more dangerous forms of competition. But we don't see such responses as particularly likely given their expense and the diminishing returns they seem to promise. Moreover, in our judgment, the greater danger stems from the fact that Russia and China are *already* "racing." Unless the United States responds to ensure a credible and effective deterrence posture at both the theater and strategic levels, strategic stability will further erode and nuclear dangers will rise.

Getting the Context Right

Although strategic stability has been a US policy interest since the advent of nuclear weapons, its place in US grand strategy has changed over time. Early in the Cold War, as the new challenges of maintaining a nuclear peace in a bipolar standoff became clear, its salience was high. As the risks of nuclear Armageddon receded along with the Cold War and the Soviet Union, its salience was reduced; the surfeit of US power after the Cold War, the United States' dominant military position, and the absence of major power rivalry allowed us this luxury. But that time has now long passed. Over the last decade, the threat environment has again evolved—but this time in new and much more dangerous ways. Yet the US national strategy for stability hasn't caught up with this shift. Something much more substantial and purposeful is now needed from the United States to restore strategic stability and to manage instability.

Eight decades ago, as another era of new rivalry broke upon us, the United States invented a new grand strategy, developed a new set of concepts to think about the new nuclear challenge, and built a new community of experts in and near government to help understand and respond to a rapidly changing world. Strategic stability was at the core of their concerns. Today, we should be inspired by their success and benefit from their insights—but not be hostage to either. The multipolar rivalry that is now upon us is much more complex and dynamic than its bipolar predecessor. The new nuclear dangers of the present and future are similar to but also different from the dangers of the past.

For most of the last decade, policymakers and the experts who advise them have hoped that legacy approaches and legacy concepts would be good enough to deliver, sooner or later, the strategic stability they have desired. They have hoped they could get by with a diplomatic strategy that has unfortunately failed to achieve its intended purposes, and a deterrence posture sized, scaled, and funded to meet only the requirements of a benign unipolar era now past.

The time for such wishful thinking is over.

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