

Körper Strategic Stability Initiative

SUMMARY

Digital Working Sessions I-III

Introduction

Over the course of one year, the [Körper Strategic Stability Initiative](#) regularly brings together experts from China, Russia, the United States and Europe to develop new ideas and approaches to strategic stability and the future of arms control. The group convenes for (in times of Coronavirus primarily) digital working sessions, allowing for a continuous exchange and interaction. This summary contains the key findings of the first three digital working sessions.

Contents

Evolution of Strategic Stability	2
Regional Perspectives on Strategic Stability	3
Threat Perceptions	4
Current Challenges to the Arms Control Architecture	6
Prospects for Trilateral Arms Control	7
Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy	10
Military Modernization and Defence Postures	11

Evolution of Strategic Stability

Participants discussed how the characteristics of strategic stability have changed.

- Strategic stability developed as a product of nuclear learning from Cold War crises. **Weak collective memory** has led to some of these lessons being forgotten.
- The international system is now characterized by **multipolarity**, with China as an emerging global power. The existing high level of interdependency in social, economic, and technological terms might transform into **independency**, thereby risking instability.
- Today's **asymmetric dyads** – between the United States and Russia, the United States and China, and China and Russia – have very different features compared to the Cold War. Each dyad has different priorities and nuances.
- **Inadvertent escalation** from a (minor) conventional conflict, possibly involving cyber or hybrid warfare, could quickly escalate to the nuclear level. The sophistication of **new technologies** might decrease the capabilities to contain escalation. Since there are more **non-nuclear strategic strike assets** available, such as conventional cruise missiles or cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, it is necessary to integrate these in the framework of strategic stability, making sure there is no inherent advantage in going first.
- **Mutual vulnerability** – officially accepted during the Cold War – is not acceptable to the United States in its relationship with China, where the power distribution is less balanced.

Participants disagreed about the link between strategic stability and the reduction of nuclear arsenals.

- It was argued that **reductions** were not part of the concept of strategic stability until the end of the Cold War. Before, stability was primarily about managing competition.
- As regards a **New START follow-on**, Russian participants argued that as long as non-nuclear strategic weapons were not included, further reductions are inconceivable due to the increasing **entanglement** between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons. Participants suggested creative approaches to make further reductions possible.

Another group of participants emphasized continuity over change in strategic stability.

- During the Cold War, strategic stability never only focused on a direct Soviet-U.S. conflict, but also included considerations of **extended deterrence** for allies.
- It was argued that the maintenance of retaliatory capabilities and decreasing incentives for a nuclear first strike by the adversary – in short, **arms race and crisis stability** – are still relevant today but need reinterpretation. Is arms racing nowadays still the pursuit of nuclear superiority or perhaps of **cross-domain superiority**?

Regional Perspectives on Strategic Stability

Participants discussed national and/or **regional differences** in the concept of **strategic stability**.

- Several participants argued that it is impossible to define a national understanding of strategic stability, because these understandings differ among different expert communities within each country. The plurality of definitions ranges from the absence of war / competition among nuclear powers to the goal of non-proliferation to narrower concepts about limiting incentives for a nuclear first-strike. One participant cautioned that strategic stability is no synonym for arms control.
- In **China**, a broader understanding of strategic stability as a basic balance of major powers is common, emphasizing the absence of crisis, the recognition of peaceful coexistence and respect for each other's key security interests, spheres of influence as well as mutual reassurance about strategic intentions. Primarily, the concept of strategic stability in China includes three levels: capabilities, posture / policy, and perceptions / communications. A narrow focus on crisis and arms race stability is mostly limited to academic circles with direct links to Western discourses. It is not widely held in foreign or security circles.
- The **European** discourse seems to focus on questions of disarmament and non-proliferation, frequently neglecting other crucial aspects such as deterrence. One participant argued that Europe should find a common language when discussing its role in strategic stability. Europe's geographical position makes it a likely region of a military conflict up to the nuclear level. This should give Europe a role, going beyond U.S. extended deterrence, in managing strategic stability. One participant mused that Europe might have to think independently from the United States about strategic stability in the future. President Macron's intention is to have Europe's voice heard in this debate and his view on strategic stability includes a balance of forces at the lowest level.
- In **Russia**, a majority views strategic stability as essentially avoiding nuclear war and limiting arms racing, which includes having second-strike capabilities and dissuading a nuclear first strike. There are disagreements on how this aim should be achieved. Much like in China, strategic stability has become synonym for the absence of war between nuclear powers and preventing nuclear annihilation. As such, the concept has become a basic tenet of Russian foreign policy and its national view on the international system. From a Russian perspective, if China is to be included in nuclear arms control, Europe has to be included, too, as France's arsenal exceeds China's.
- In the **United States**, strategic stability is most often defined narrowly in terms of arms race stability and crisis stability. But more than any other player the United States has a changing understanding of how to maintain strategic stability, with significant variation from one administration to the next.

Threat Perceptions

Participants estimated the **principal threat to strategic stability** for the main actors:

- As regards the threat perceptions of the **United States**, participants agreed that threats to U.S. allies in conjunction with regional power play in Europe and East Asia as well as certain new technologies might be perceived as the principal threat to strategic stability from the perspective of the United States. Participants did not agree on the impact of the current crisis in arms control on the U.S. threat perception.
- As for **Europe**, participants agreed that abandonment by the United States, great power competition (including arms races) and the current crisis in arms control are perceived as major threats to strategic stability for the continent.
- Looking at **Russia**, participants agreed that the United States with its offensive and defensive conventional military capabilities – perhaps in pursuit of strategic invulnerability - is considered the main threat to strategic stability.
- As regards **China**, participants agreed that, again, the United States with its offensive and defensive conventional military capabilities – perhaps in pursuit of strategic invulnerability - is considered the main threat to strategic stability.
- Some **key takeaways**: The United States seems to pose similar challenges to both Russia and China. Europe is at the receiving end of the threat spectrum, while U.S. alliance commitments seem to make the United States more vulnerable. Misperceptions are caused by both capabilities and lack of communication.

		Principal Threat to Strategic Stability for...			
		United States	Europe	Russia	China
As seen by...	Team U.S.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China and Russia’s conventional “regional overmatch” capabilities China’s and Russia’s sub-strategic nuclear systems Impact of “new technologies” on potential for nuclear escalation Misperceptions about planning and postures, as well as a lack of a constructive dialogue among the United States, Russia, and China 	Being stuck in the middle between U.S. and China or being abandoned by the U.S.	U.S. pursuit of strategic invulnerability	U.S. pursuit of strategic invulnerability
	Team Europe	Risk of limited nuclear use against allies in a regional context	U.S. abandonment	U.S. conventional counterforce capabilities for both offensive and defensive means	U.S. conventional counterforce capabilities for both offensive and defensive means
	Team Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China’s unwillingness to take part in arms control anti-satellite weapons Russian destabilizing behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian tactical nukes, Russian aggressive behavior in Europe (incl. cyber-attacks) dismantlement of arms control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constant development and diversification of U.S. offensive and defensive capabilities, including conventional ones Unwillingness to limit them or agree to mutually acceptable rules of the road amid intensification of political confrontation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. policy of containment of China Increase of offensive U.S. weapons in Asia (incl. INF-class weapons) U.S. missile defenses
	Team China	China’s regional military advantage in Asia-Pacific, including new technologies like AI for cross-domain deterrence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arms races amongst the major powers demise of arms control treaties like INF unsure relationship with the U.S. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. missile defense space military capabilities conventional strikes from U.S. and NATO 	U.S. rejection of mutual vulnerability, through development of missile defense & other strategic offensive capabilities (in collaboration w/ allies in some cases)

Current Challenges to the Arms Control Architecture

- Participants agreed that the **U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty (OST)** is **detrimental to cooperative security**. Most participants also believed that Russia would remain in the treaty, even though it was not clear for how long. While Europeans are committed to upholding OST, Russian participants cautioned that Russian implementation would certainly end if European NATO allies were to share OST data with the United States. A Russian withdrawal would further impact the already deteriorating European security landscape, which still suffers from the termination of the **INF Treaty**.
- Failing to extend the **New START Treaty** was seen as similarly damaging to Euro-Atlantic security. From a German perspective, a one-time extension by five years is in Europe's interest. At the same time, Germany shares U.S. concerns about new Russian weapon systems and a more assertive China. These concerns should, however, be addressed on the basis of an extended New START Treaty. It was considered unlikely that China will change its position on nuclear arms control in the next years, whereas dialogue on new technologies and space weapons could have potential for cooperation. From a Russian perspective, limitations on weapons systems in which Russia has an advantage, such as with tactical nuclear weapons, are not acceptable without addressing the areas where Washington has the upper hand.
- The **COVID-19 pandemic** also has a negative impact on arms control. Inspections and observations cannot take place or only in a reduced format. Important gatherings such as the NPT Review Conference had to be postponed. Growing tensions between major powers over the handling of the crisis are having a negative effect on the general security environment. At the same time, strained budgets in the wake of the economic fall-out might be additional incentives to manage a looming arms race.

Prospects for Trilateral Arms Control

The discussion then moved to **Chinese views** on arms control and specific **proposals for trilateral arms control**.

- With a new arms race among the United States, Russia, and China on the horizon, trilateral arms control could help manage the already intensifying competition and reduce security risks. The Chinese political leadership recognizes that the **U.S.-China rivalry is in a high-risk period** with the potential to spin out of control.
- There are significant challenges to trilateral arms control. A major obstacle is **China's mistrust of U.S. proposals**. From a Chinese perspective, Washington might use arms control as a pretense to contain China while at the same time withdrawing from existing agreements to untie its own hands – regardless of Chinese behavior.
- This matches **long-standing skepticism** in China regarding arms control, which is viewed by some as a means of powerful states to dominate weaker ones. This is compounded by a belief that **greater U.S. expertise and experience in verification** could allow Washington to cheat while keeping Beijing constrained. Moreover, according to a Chinese participant, expecting the adversary to harbor malign intentions is common thinking among Chinese security experts. In addition, Chinese security experts do not have the positive experience of Cold War confidence-building measures.
- This is also why the **U.S. approach of pressuring China** into joining arms control is **likely to backfire**, as a Chinese participant argued. U.S. attempts to outspend China are questionable, since China is becoming more confident about its technological capabilities and its ability to prevail over the long run. In addition, the Chinese public supports substantive military spending.
- A precondition for trilateral arms control will be a shared understanding of the goal of **managing competition instead of winning it**. Compromise will be more conducive to any arms control initiatives than coercion.
- One concrete suggestion discussed was a **trilateral agreement combining New START and INF provisions**, thus setting a **common limit** for strategic and INF-range systems. As all parties have similar overall numbers when mixing systems, this would address the asymmetry in strategic weapons between the United States and Russia vis-à-vis China as well as China's large arsenal of INF-type missiles.¹
- Such an agreement's provisions would have to be very broad. Its main benefit would be to make it **acceptable for China** to join a trilateral arms control agreement on an equal footing, not as junior partner, and thus commit China to transparency measures. It was debated, however, whether transparency was actually acceptable to China, for its posture relies heavily on opacity regarding the location of its missiles and launchers to maintain retaliatory capability.

¹ For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Tong Zhao: "The Case for China's Participation in Trilateral Arms Control", in: Ulrich Kühn (ed.), Trilateral Arms Control? Perspectives from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, IFSH Research Report #2, 03/2020, pp. 68-94.

- Participants debated whether the instrument of **National Technical Means (NTMs)** could address Chinese doubts regarding the U.S. technological advantage when it comes to **verification**. A Chinese participant cautioned that the Chinese resistance to NTMs during negotiations for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty showed that China does not necessarily view NTMs positively. Moreover, a Russian participant argued that a trilateral agreement relying on NTMs for verification would actually be a step back from New START to SALT provisions.
- There was also discussion on how a trilateral agreement might affect the relationships among each of the three countries. For the United States it might actually not be advantageous to negotiate a trilateral agreement with both Russia and China, because the latter share common interests on issues like missile defense. However, another viewpoint sees Russia as opposed to including China in a trilateral agreement, since such an agreement is only necessary in a deterrence relationship – which Russia does not consider to have with China. A trilateral agreement could thus be **detrimental to Sino-Russian relations**. Most participants agreed, however, that in the long-term, Russia will support bringing China into future arms control arrangements.
- An alternative proposal for the mid-term future would be **bilateral agreements** between the United States and China as well as between the United States and Russia. This would also circumvent the issue of including France and the United Kingdom in talks.
- Chinese participants cautioned that any attempt at including China in an arms control deal would be a **long process**, unlikely to bring about radical reductions in the near to mid-term. It might therefore be necessary to **begin with confidence-building and transparency measures**. Moreover, the terminology “strategic stability” would be preferable to “arms control.”
- This process should also include **top-level diplomacy** in order to convince the Chinese leadership of the benefits involved. Such benefits could lie in cost reductions and increased international standing through assuming a responsible leadership role. A positive public statement regarding arms control from the Chinese leadership would empower the arms control community, which does currently not have a strong voice in China’s bureaucracy. At the same time, **bottom-up initiatives**, e.g. through exchanges of U.S., Russian, and European experts with Chinese counterparts on the value and technicalities of verification regimes, could produce a trickle-up effect.
- Any initiative should **start with areas of common interest**, e.g. risk reduction with regard to new weapon systems, like hypersonic or cyber weapons, and tackle concrete problems. One such proposal could be commissioning a joint study on the technical feasibility of a U.S. **missile defense system** that could only intercept North Korean but not Russian and Chinese ICBMs.
- The **role of Europe** in this process could include a strong appeal for arms control, especially as Washington is retreating. Europe could sponsor both capacity-building initiatives and expert-level discussions on concrete issues, e.g. on the impact of new technologies. China views Europe as a very important third party in an intensifying competition with the United States, which will give weight to any European initiatives in this area.

Policy Recommendations for Trilateral Arms Control

- When it comes to trilateral arms control, the United States, Russia and China should adopt an exploratory mode (“start small and go slow”):
 - Begin with trilateral **conventional** arms control as well as technical meetings, working groups and confidence-building measures (CBMs).
 - **Build up** to a trilateral agreement on narrow and less controversial topics, e.g. not targeting each other's nuclear command, control, and communications.
 - Engage senior political leadership and experts to discuss possible "**quid pro quos.**"
- Benefits to the United States, Russia and China for engaging in trilateral arms control might include:
 - Economic benefits
 - International prestige and being recognized as “responsible” powers
 - Risk reduction, especially during crises
 - Demonstrating commitment to NPT Article VI
 - Addressing asymmetries affecting strategic stability
 - Managing a new arms race
- **Substantive dyadic dialogues** among the three countries were considered equally important as trilateral engagement. **Two bilateral tracks**, or alternatively, one formal treaty between Russia and the United States as well as a political understanding between China and the United States, could be ways forward. One participant argued that two bilateral tracks could be **potentially unstable**, as an U.S. arms race with China would inevitably spill over into the U.S.-Russian relationship.
- Other participants suggested that a serious **P5 process** on strategic risk reduction/CBMs could be more promising than a trilateral one. At the same time, the P5 process has already existed for ten years and has yielded almost no substantive results.
- Since both Russia and the United States insist that the next round of strategic nuclear arms control talks should not be limited to them, these two countries should be more explicit about what they would expect of the others in order to further reduce their arsenals.
- “**Arms control socialization**” with regard to China, including expert dialogues, could be in the short-term more successful than negotiations to arrive at a shared view of what arms control can deliver and to prevent a decoupling of communities as a result of increased hostilities.

Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Policy

- On 2 June 2020, Russia for the first time publicly released its “**Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence.**” According to Russian participants, this declaration of nuclear deterrence policy does not contain a major deviation from what has previously been stated on the issue. Its value lies in **combining previous statements** on deterrence in Russia’s military doctrine and by the Russian leadership in one official document. It was argued that the document is **not a short-term reaction to political events**. However, it cannot be read without taking into account the deteriorating security environment and the looming expiration of New START.
- The Principles re-affirm that any final decision on **the use of nuclear weapons** has to be taken by the president. It also re-states that Russia will consider a nuclear response if attacked by nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, or by conventional weapons in case they threaten **the very existence of the state**. The Principles also codify Vladimir Putin’s statement at the Valdai Club that the **launch of ballistic missiles against Russia** could be enough to trigger a nuclear response (launch on warning, LOW). Moreover, Moscow could consider **attacks against critical governmental or military facilities** (or anything critical to **nuclear infrastructure**) sufficient for nuclear use.
- The document also includes a **list of potential military risks** to Russia, which it aims to **deter with its nuclear arsenal**. Most of these risks do not fall under Russia’s conditions for nuclear use and Russia does not specify its deterrence policy.
- Likely the most controversial part of the document is a paragraph describing Russia’s deterrence policy as preventing “an escalation of military actions and their termination on conditions that are acceptable for the Russian Federation ...” The group disagreed whether that is an implicit confirmation of an **escalate to de-escalate (E2D)** strategy, i.e. the early use of nuclear weapons by Russia in support of conventional offense. While some participants argued that this could be read as a confirmation of E2D, others pointed out that this paragraph was explicitly and solely about the aim of deterrence, not employment of nuclear weapons, and thus did not lend itself to such an interpretation.
- Overall, the document provides **greater transparency** on Russia’s deterrence policy, while at the same time being **intentionally ambiguous**. This ambiguity was amplified by the fact, one participant argued, that the document contained **very little new policy**, when in fact weapons technology and security relations had changed dramatically. Another participant interpreted the document as sending the message that the **role of nuclear deterrence was generally increasing**.

Military Modernization and Defence Postures

- The discussion then turned to the role of military modernization and defence postures, and their effects on strategic stability. Postures and doctrines can make a significant stabilizing contribution. Participants developed the following **recommendations on how to stabilize great power relations via postures and doctrines**:
 - Postures and doctrines should **minimize chances for preemption**. This should involve limitations and reductions of destabilizing weapons, such as high-precision, INF-class, and space-based weapons.
 - Postures and doctrines should **reduce ambiguity while increasing predictability and confidence**, as ambiguity might increase the risk of escalation in a conflict.
 - Postures and doctrines should **focus on deterrence, not compellence**.
 - **P5 countries should limit their counterforce capabilities** – both offensive and defensive as well as both nuclear and conventional – as they are a driver of modernization. A **dialogue about counterforce capabilities** as seen from the adversary’s perspective could be conducive to such efforts.
 - The P5 should **increase dialogue on transparency of force structures**, beginning with numbers of warheads, chains of command, and status of operational warheads. Due to different security needs, levels of transparency could as well differ.
 - Existing P5 exchanges on doctrines should be deepened and broadened to **discuss what constitutes stabilizing postures and doctrines**, including controversial topics such as E2D as well as the prevention of military circumstances that could lead to E2D-like scenarios.
 - States should **engage in a renewed discussion on launch on warning** in order to clarify whether the current strategic and technological environment really justifies LOW postures and the risks associated. The advent of hypersonic weapons and an increasingly antagonistic relationship between the United States and China could amplify existing risks associated with inadvertent escalation. With a LOW posture, not only Russia, but also China could (mis)interpret an incoming object from the United States as a nuclear attack.