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STRATEGIC STABILITY AND U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

A Policy Memo

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Strategic Stability and US-Russian Relations

Strategic stability came to be defined during the Cold War in terms of deterrence: the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union was stable as long as both sides knew that each could respond in a devastating way to a nuclear attack by the other. Stability consisted of two elements – crisis stability and arms race stability. The concept of strategic stability was especially important for the way in which ballistic missile defense was viewed in the Cold War. Although the term “strategic stability” is not used in the ABM Treaty of 1972, its basic elements are reflected in the preamble to the treaty: “effective measures to limit anti-ballistic missile systems would be a substantial factor in curbing the race in strategic offensive arms and would lead to a decrease in the risk of outbreak of war involving nuclear weapons.”

Is a new conception of strategic stability needed?

World politics no longer turns on the axis of US-Soviet rivalry. The United States and Russia do not regard each other as enemies or as the main source of nuclear danger. Nor do they see nuclear deterrence as the most effective instrument for dealing with nuclear terrorism, which they both view as perhaps the most urgent nuclear threat. Neither country, however, is ready to dismiss completely the danger of a nuclear threat arising from the other in the future; they remain committed therefore to policies of nuclear deterrence. In this context, the concept of strategic stability has not lost its currency.

During the Cold War strategic stability was defined largely in technical terms, as a function of the relationship between the strategic nuclear forces on either side, but a crucial political assumption was built into this definition: it was taken for granted that a hostile political relationship existed between the two sides. Each assumed that the other might launch a first strike if it believed that it could prevent, or render ineffectual, a retaliatory strike.

Many (though by no means all) analysts in the U.S. and Russia believe that a new concept of strategic stability is needed. Because deterrence is grounded in the presumption of enmity, the concept of strategic stability helps to define the US-Russian relationship as one in which suspicion and mistrust play an important role. The concept needs to be redefined in a way that takes account of the changed relationship between the U.S. and Russia and also allows that relationship to develop in a more cooperative way.

One way to proceed is to incorporate a more significant political component into the current concept. Although the level of forces required for deterrence depends in part on the forces the other state has, it also depends on the nature of the political relationship with that state. The forces needed to deter a mortal enemy will be larger than those needed to deter a less hostile country, because the latter is less likely to give its political goals a value that would outweigh the losses even a small retaliatory strike could inflict. This means there should be further scope for reductions in nuclear forces.

A second approach is to broaden the way in which stability is conceived. In their joint statement of 24 June 2010 on strategic stability, Medvedev and Obama implicitly advocated a new concept by committing themselves to “continuing the development of a *new strategic relationship* based on mutual trust, openness, predictability, and cooperation.” [Emphasis added.] This is not a complete departure from the Cold War concept of strategic stability, which also assumed that predictability was stabilizing and that at least some degree of openness and cooperation was necessary for arms control. It does articulate, however, the goal of a cooperative relationship that would be mutually more beneficial than that implied by the Cold War concept of strategic stability. The distinction is not that “strategic cooperation” is more stable than “strategic stability” but that stability rests on a different and broader (e.g. economic, technological, political) basis and that the benefits that accrue to both parties are much greater.

Strategic stability and missile defense

The United States and Russia are engaged in discussions about cooperation in missile defense, and there is a widespread belief that such cooperation could lead to a transformation for the better of the strategic relationship between the United States and NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other. The fact that such cooperation is regarded as desirable by both sides is, however, no guarantee that it will be accomplished. Even when there is an obvious settlement that would leave both parties better off, it is often impossible to resolve conflicts or disputes. Barriers of various kinds (strategic, psychological, and structural) can get in the way of agreement. One strategy

for overcoming these barriers takes the form of four basic questions that parties to a dispute must explore together.

First, are the parties able and willing to articulate a future for the other side that it would find minimally bearable? No negotiation can be successful unless both parties believe they could tolerate a situation in which the other side's basic aspirations were realized. This sets boundaries to the range of tolerable agreements. Productive cooperation probably requires more: a shared vision of the future, which narrows those boundaries further, creating a degree of predictability. This issue is absolutely central. Russia fears that the US might aim to break out of the relationship of mutual deterrence by providing itself with a missile defense system that in ten years or so will begin to threaten Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent and wants legally-binding guarantees that the United States will not attempt to do that. The U.S. disavows any such intention but refuses to accept any limitations on its activities.

Second, can the two sides trust each other to take the steps necessary to reach and implement an agreement? Serious obstacles such as bureaucratic resistance, special interests, and internal disagreements may stand in the way. We speak, for the sake of convenience, of two parties to a dispute, but those parties are not unitary: within each there are likely to be groups with different interests and different ideas. That is certainly the case with respect to BMD cooperation. The Obama Administration hopes that cooperation in missile defense will remove Russian suspicions and establish mutual trust on this issue, persuading the Russians that US and NATO missile defense systems are not directed against them. But the Russians have not so far been persuaded that this is the right approach.

Third, can the parties to a conflict make the compromises that are needed to reach agreement? The United States has told the Russian government that it cannot accept any limitations on its missile defense capabilities, "which are designed to defend against limited attacks from ballistic missile threats." Russia for its part has asked for legally-binding guarantees, but has also indicated that such guarantees might not be adequate. How can the United States make a credible commitment not to proceed with the deployment of BMD that would undermine the Russian deterrent?

Fourth, for agreements to succeed, they must appear to both sides to be equitable. The important principle is perhaps that of equal security. Disparities in the level of systems development may make this difficult. The legacy the past also plays a role. Russia believes that the United States and NATO took advantage of its weakness in the 1990s and this reinforces Russian suspicions about the present motives of the United States and NATO. Some of the new members of NATO harbor deep suspicions of Russian intentions, and this plays an important role in NATO policy. These mutual suspicions heighten the importance of equity and equal security in any arrangement to cooperate on missile defense.

Conclusion

Russia fears that US missile defense plans may be directed against it and intended ultimately to undermine the ability of Russian strategic forces to retaliate in the event of an American nuclear attack, thereby negating the deterrent effect of those forces. Of course Russia is very unlikely to allow any such thing to happen; it would take steps to ensure that its strategic nuclear forces could overwhelm the missile defenses or otherwise render them ineffective. In other words, strategic stability would be maintained, but it would be “low-level” stability based on strategic arms competition and almost surely accompanied by mutual distrust and political tension. That is a state of affairs that neither side wants.

The task facing the United States, NATO and Russia is how to avoid that outcome. The questions listed above point to issues that need to be addressed if a transition is to be made from a “low-level” strategic stability to a “high-level” strategic cooperation, as the presidents’ statement on strategic stability calls for.

Many hopes have been put in BMD cooperation as a way of getting to a new relationship based on mutual trust, openness, predictability, and cooperation. But perhaps that is too much to ask of BMD cooperation. The difficulties in reaching agreement on BMD cooperation spring from the very absence of those values that BMD cooperation is supposed to engender. Perhaps other ways of creating strategic cooperation need to be found.