

Finding Shared Interests Despite Conflicting Ones: A Comment on “Pursuing Enhanced Strategic Stability Through Russia-U.S. Dialogue”

Dr. Philipp C. Bleek, Associate Professor, Nonproliferation and Terrorism Studies, Middlebury Institute of International Studies and Fellow, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

Kudos to the PIR Center, and its partner the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS), for their substantive 2017 and 2018 dialogues on reducing nuclear dangers, ably distilled by Adlan Margojev in the May 2019 report “Pursuing Enhanced Strategic Stability Through Russia-U.S. Dialogue.”

Full disclosure: I have a fellow affiliation at CNS and am faculty at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, where CNS is based, and which partners with the PIR Center and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) on a dual degree masters program. I also participated in a separate, December 2019 Track 1.5 dialogue organized by the U.S. Center for Strategic and International Studies and the PIR Center. As the comments below hopefully support, these affiliations do not prevent me from substantive engagement.

I have several broad comments in response to the report. Some of these might be interpreted as constructive criticism, but it’s worth emphasizing that to a considerable degree the comments are also consistent with the content of the report.

- 1) Cooperation need not be rooted in comity:** Much of the content surfaced in the dialogues is consistent with one of academic strategist Thomas Schelling’s fundamental insights—with profound relevance for both nuclear deterrence and arms control—that even states in highly antagonistic relationships have deep shared interests. The present U.S.-Russian relationship has aspects of both antagonism and comity. Schelling would argue that the two countries have shared interests not only *despite* their antagonism, as is commonly claimed, but also *because of* it. The most obvious example is that large-scale nuclear war would be a lose-lose situation for both parties, even if the costs were unevenly distributed.

At the same time, the more antagonistic the relationship, the more it will matter, and be perceived to matter, how the benefits of cooperation are distributed. The fact that both sides benefit from cooperation is sufficient basis for cooperation in the context of a more amicable relationship. But in a more antagonistic one, an uneven distribution of benefits will be seen as more consequential, so that even non-zero sum collaboration where both parties benefit will increasingly take on the character of a zero sum environment where one party’s gains are seen as the other party’s losses. Precisely this dynamic manifested in the arms control context during some of the more challenging years of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War relationship.

It bears emphasizing that the broader critique is a matter of tone as much as substance. As my comments below suggest, I think it is crucial that more “hardline” actors on both sides are engaged in these conversations. And those actors will be more susceptible to arguments rooted in advancing their countries’ national security interests. And those arguments are tenable, even though somewhat more challenging as relations deteriorate.

- 2) Don’t caricature the “hawks,” engage them:** There are surely some Dr. Strangelovian actors on both sides who sincerely “believe that a nuclear war can be won,” but they should not be

lumped together with those who merely think nuclear war can be lost less. Government nuclear strategists in the United States, both uniformed and civilian, hold a set of beliefs about nuclear weapons that it sometimes feels like arms control proponents would rather caricature than engage (how widespread similar beliefs are in Russia I will leave it to others to assess). These beliefs may be wrong, but they are not delusional.

One of the fundamental goals of U.S. nuclear policy has long been damage limitation, reducing the severity of consequences should nuclear war break out. Advances in both nuclear weapons and conventional ones make this more feasible, but also heighten some of the dilemmas associated with such capabilities. To a considerable extent such capabilities are inherent in both nuclear and non-nuclear weapons, so ignoring them or even adopting declaratory policies inconsistent with them will not wholly ameliorate those dilemmas. Arms control must deal with these realities.

More broadly, there is a widespread belief that nuclear weapons—both the risks they entail and in extreme circumstances the capabilities they provide—have at least some role beyond deterring others' use of nuclear weapons. For example, it is widely, though certainly not universally, believed that nuclear weapons bear some responsibility for the absence of direct great power war since World War II. This may be empirically wrong, or it may be right but the risks may outweigh the benefits. But it is not patently absurd. In fact, dismissing at face value the notion that such devastating weapons would shape others' behavior in various, consequential ways seems less tenable.

- 3) Define strategic stability:** The term strategic stability is frequently used but rarely defined. Conversations around strategic stability would benefit from more clearly defining it (something the report goes some way toward doing).

The most widespread interpretation of the term refers to what might be called *first strike stability* (which might also be termed *second strike stability*), i.e. lack of incentives to use nuclear weapons first, either during peacetime or, more plausibly, during crises or conflicts. But the term is sometimes also used to refer to what might be called *arms race stability*, i.e. lack of incentives to seek advantage over others by breaking out of formal arms control arrangements or the informal status quo and covertly or openly enlarging or enhancing nuclear arsenals. Finally, the term might also refer to *conventional conflict stability*, i.e. lack of incentives emanating from the nuclear level that make large-scale, low-level, or asymmetric sub-nuclear conflict more likely or reduce its likelihood less than might otherwise be the case.

I hope these modest observations are useful in advancing much-needed dialogue on this immensely important topic. In closing, I want to again commend both the organizers and the participants for what were clearly very substantive conversations and to thank the PIR Center, and Adlan Margojev specifically, for the invitation to comment on them.