Körber Strategic Stability Initiative

Towards a Common, Peaceful and Safe Future

Nineteen policy recommendations for the future of great power arms control and strategic stability.

From a working group of Chinese, European, Russian, and U.S.-American experts convening in the framework of the Körber Strategic Stability Initiative in cooperation with IFSH Hamburg. Document drafted by Liana Fix, Christoph Heilmeier, and Ulrich Kühn (April 2021).

INTRODUCTION

Why Strategic Stability?

The 21st century brings with it a new round of dangerous great power competition. In contrast to the 20th century Cold War, this competition will involve more actors, more domains of competition, and a technological environment that evolves with unprecedented speed. At the same time, all modes of cooperation are in retreat. As a result, the risk of inadvertent military escalation among nuclear powers is increasing. Efforts to strengthen strategic stability – primarily involving Russia, the United States, and China – will not necessarily rein in competition in all spheres of great power rivalry. However it can play a vital role in stabilizing security relationships and preventing competition from escalating into open conflict. The short window of opportunity created by the five-year extension of New START until 2026 should be used by political leaders to take concrete steps to enhance strategic stability. The Körber Strategic Stability Initiative developed nineteen principles and policy recommendations that can serve as a starting point towards that end. Together, states can choose a different path and change our collective fate.

What is Strategic Stability?

This definition of strategic stability was agreed upon at the Körber Strategic Stability Initiative: Strategic stability describes a state of affairs that aims to minimize all types of risks of deterrence failure. It can be understood as a state in which the postures, capabilities and doctrines of nuclear-armed states do not incentivize the first use of nuclear weapons in a crisis; in which those states have an assured retaliatory capability; and in which they do not improve their relative position by increasing strategic arsenals qualitatively or quantitatively. Strategic stability concerns not only the nuclear domain, but also space, cyber and advanced offensive and defensive conventional weapon systems.

The group also noted that definitions differ among expert communities within each country, from very narrow to extremely broad definitions. A shared understanding of strategic stability among great powers would be helpful, but as long as they can agree on shared concerns and as long as discussions on strategic stability result in concrete measures that would reduce the risk of military escalation and help disincentivize strategic first strikes, a mutually agreed definition is not mandatory.

Policy Recommendations

General Principles

1. A willingness to manage competition is a precondition for strategic stability.
In order to avoid the catastrophic consequences of great power conflict in the 21st century, the United States, Russia, and China should manage their competitions by following a number of general rules of the road. They should proceed from a joint understanding that avoiding military conflict will have to involve a basic political willingness to listen and to compromise. They should also refrain from pursuing strategic invulnerability. Moreover, demands for unilateral concessions are not likely to contribute to efforts to manage competition and achieve strategic stability. Finally, arms control is a key policy tool to help bring about strategic stability. For any successful arms control initiative, cooperation and mutual gains will be necessary.

2. Re-learn the lessons of the Cold War.
Our current understanding of strategic stability is a product of learning from Cold War crises. In the intensifying great power rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China, many of these lessons seem to be forgotten. Although today's conditions are different, great powers can benefit from looking back at approaches towards managing competition in the past. The ongoing crisis in arms control and the lack of constructive dialogue create additional pressures to retreat to zero-sum and worst-case thinking – preconditions for arms racing and instability. Reversing that trend will mean (re-)learning the merits of restraint and of arms control. At the same time, a dialogue about the sources of instability is needed and should be possible without necessarily being tied to concrete arms control outcomes.

3. Focus on what is possible.
Enhancing strategic stability between the United States, Russia, and China, will be a long, uncertain and iterative process which may have to include a new arms control architecture, as there are more and more novel and evolving strategic strike assets. Parties should exercise due diligence not to overburden any future agenda on strategic stability and instead spend time jointly identifying those areas that lend themselves most to potential cooperative approaches. They should prioritize creativity but refrain from trying to create grand bargains that encompass every challenge. At the same time, efforts to enhance bilateral strategic stability between the United States and Russia should be redoubled.

4. Prioritize substance over format with regard to asymmetries in capabilities.
Strategic stability in the 21st century requires new and innovative concepts that address the asymmetry in capabilities, especially between the United States and Russia on the one hand (both have substantially larger nuclear arsenals than China) and China on the other hand (with a larger arsenal of land-based dual-capable missiles). Parties should be open to address these asymmetries on different levels of engagement – bilaterally, trilaterally or in multi-party talks – depending on the issue and the relationships involved. Concrete security issues should be prioritized over questions of format: the format has to be adapted to the respective issue at hand.

5. Respect the interests of non-nuclear allies, including other countries' allies.
As during the Cold War, strategic stability becomes additionally complex where allies and extended

deterrence arrangements come into play. While strategic stability primarily involves Russia, the United States, and China, the concerns of key regional states should be respected and considered. This includes the views of non-nuclear weapon states and other countries' allies. To strengthen regional stability, great powers should take into account the positions of their allies and the allies of their competitors as their actions can have an important impact on strategic stability through direct and indirect links between regional conflicts, (non-)proliferation and strategic stability. An increase or decrease in strategic stability can contribute to or limit regional interest in proliferation, and vice versa.

6. Europe should find its own voice in strategic stability talks.

Europeans should more actively engage in strategic stability debates by sponsoring both capacity-building initiatives as well as expert-level discussions and act as a trusted convener. They should be more active in encouraging great powers to respect existing norms. Most importantly, Europeans should develop and push their own concrete arms control proposals in order not to remain bystanders in great power competition.

Low-Hanging Fruit

7. Engage in arms control "socialization".

Transparency – often considered an early stepping-stone for more ambitious arms control measures – is not always met with enthusiasm by all parties. As an interim measure, the United States and Russia could engage in preparatory steps such as sharing and familiarizing other parties with basic arms control concepts, procedures, practices and relevant expertise. Such formats could focus on the value and technicalities of verification and should regularly include technical experts, members of the military, and top-level diplomats. This could be a starting point to arrive at a shared view of what arms control can deliver. Bottom-up initiatives in the form of expert exchanges could assist such efforts. This would prevent a decoupling of expert and diplomatic communities in times of great power competition and help establish a level playing field of expertise.

8. Deepen existing exchanges and improve crisis communication among the P5.

The ongoing P5 process could serve as a framework for discussing strategic risk reduction and confidence-building measures. To improve crisis communication, P5 states could aim to establish "hotlines" amongst all five parties and exchange notifications about planned missile launches. Such procedures would preclude misunderstandings that can lead to escalatory effects and enhance predictability.

9. Pursue joint political declarations.

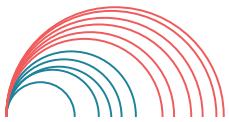
In lieu of limitations or reductions, which are more difficult to achieve, joint political declarations could help create a more cooperative environment. An updated declaration of the Reagan-Gorbachev statement that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought, together with affirmations not to target each other's nuclear command, control, and communications for preemption would be important steps.

10. Train and recruit more arms control experts.

Any future negotiations will require competent professionals to support the process. With no formal talks over the past decade, Russia and the United States will likely need to recruit and train more diplomats, technical experts, scientists, and lawyers. This is even more critical for actors which have less experience in arms control diplomacy.

11. Identify lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 demonstrated that external surprise factors, such as a pandemic, can accelerate great power tensions and have a negative effect on the general security environment and on arms control efforts. Certain arms control inspections and observations could not take place or only in a reduced format. Important gatherings such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference and the New START Bilateral Consultative Commission had to be postponed. Parties should identify lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as to uphold dialogue, inspections and observations wherever possible and develop secure communication channels.



More Ambitious Goals

12. Consider mixing systems as a model for trilateral arms control.

When exploring options for an arms control framework between the United States, Russia, and China, a "mix-and-match" approach could be considered. For example, New START provisions could be combined with provisions on INF-range systems, thus setting a common limit for INF-range and strategic systems for all three parties. Besides limiting the numbers, such an approach may also have to address the geographical deployments of INF-range weapons, as an INF-range system next to another country's borders may be seen as a "strategic" system. This "mix-and-match" approach would help address both the asymmetry in strategic weapons between the United States and Russia vis-à-vis China, as well as China's large arsenal of INF-range missiles.

13. Try to reconcile divergent interests regarding missile defenses.

U.S. efforts to expand missile defense are often interpreted as deliberate moves away from the principle of strategic stability. All parties should accept that missile defenses should be a legitimate subject of strategic stability talks, despite divergent interests. The United States, Russia and China should aim at finding mutually acceptable ways to mitigate the negative impacts of missile defenses on strategic stability, acknowledging that missile defenses should not undermine secure second-strike capabilities.

14. Encourage measures to maximize decision-making time.

P5 states, as well as the nuclear-weapon states India and Pakistan, should engage in a joint discussion on how to give national leaders as much time as possible in an escalating crisis and against the backdrop of a host of novel political and technological risks. They should pursue a dialogue on maximizing decision-making time and identify which steps could be taken by other parties to contribute to that goal. This could be supported by a joint study on new risks associated with current postures, addressing novel threats by emerging technologies. In parallel, these countries should also accelerate a dialogue on ways to limit and reduce the risks of surprise counterforce strikes originating from nuclear and non-nuclear weapons.

15. Reject nuclear compellence.

Postures and doctrines can play an important role in minimizing the risk of open conflict. Nuclear-weapon states should adopt policies that clearly reject nuclear compellence. In addition, these states should engage in dialogues explaining how their policies contribute to deterrence and where perceptions might diverge. Such dialogues on nuclear doctrines, postures, messaging, and capabilities could be conducive to limiting the risk of arms racing and prevent potentially destabilizing effects caused by one side believing that the other side has adopted a doctrine that lowers the nuclear threshold.

16. Address the risk of entanglement.

The increasing entanglement of nuclear and non-nuclear strategic assets creates a risk of inadvertent escalation. Arms control measures between the United States, Russia, China and key regional states should address these risks, for instance by focusing on mutual threat perceptions arising from entanglement and new technologies. The United States, Russia and China would also benefit from a joint study on escalation implications of entangled weapon systems, and they should take steps towards "disentanglement" where necessary and possible.

17. Clarify the risks introduced by hypersonic weapons for strategic stability.

While the technologies of hypersonic weapons are still evolving, it is yet unclear to what extent they will affect strategic stability. On the one hand, they could strengthen a second-strike capability and allow parties to maintain a minimal level of mutual vulnerability without possessing rough numerical parity, thereby enhancing strategic stability. On the other hand, the deployment of hypersonic weapons with strategic missions might lead to various types of ambiguity – from warhead to target ambiguity, due to better manoeuvrability. In addition, they create challenges to warning and decision-making time. To clarify these risks and challenges, states should engage in a dialogue on the impact of hypersonic weapons on strategic stability as a step towards designing applicable arms control mechanisms.

18. Engage in a dialogue on principles of AI use in military weapon systems.

Pressure for developing and employing autonomous technology both in weapon systems and military decision-making will mount as technology and geopolitical competition progress. Specific AI-infused systems could potentially lower the threshold for an attack, and could, in case of technical failures, lead to escalation. States should engage in a dialogue to explain to each other the principles they consider acceptable when including AI in military weapon systems. This could be pursued in parallel bilateral tracks between the United States and Russia and the United States and China, or in a multilteral format.

19. Establish norms for cyber competition in the nuclear domain.

Cyber threats pose manifold challenges to strategic stability and encompass a range of activities, targets, and actors. Regulation will have to be a patchwork process: long-term, decentralized, parallel, and frequently ad-hoc. Priority should be given to mitigating the risks posed by cyber threats in the nuclear domain. As a first step, the P5 should identify a "risk hierarchy" for the nuclear domain where they can agree that cyber competition would be too dangerous and work on establishing norms and rules of the game. An example would be a code of conduct not to conduct cyber attacks against each other's nuclear early-warning, command, control and communications systems.