

Prospects for U.S.-Russian Arms Control and Strategic Stability

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Polina Sinovets¹

Odessa Mechnikov National University (Ukraine)

This has been an eventful year so far for U.S.-Russian relations in the field of nuclear weapons. The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review ([NPR](#)) was released in February 2018 and it raised a number of potential future problems for strategic stability. The speech by President Vladimir Putin to the Russian Federal Assembly in March showed that Russia is currently at a high point in strategic arms development. Clashes over arms control treaties, classic Russian misperceptions and strategies of disinformation (about elements in the NPR), and the lack of information exchange and comprehensive dialogue between Moscow and Washington are creating current, and undoubtedly future, frictions in bilateral relations.

The most recent Russian Military Doctrine indicates that nuclear weapons remain an important element for “[preventing](#)” large-scale conflict. This appears to be a continuum of its “escalate to de-escalate” strategy. For its part, the language, rhetoric, and style of the U.S. NPR indicate both continuity and change (between the Trump and Obama administration’s nuclear posture reviews). Perhaps the most noteworthy change is that it seems to address Russia’s “escalate to de-escalate” conceptualization by assigning nuclear weapons a significantly larger role. The main motivation is quite clear: [paraphrasing](#) the Cold War French ideologist of deterrence Andre de Beaufre, there is no deterrence if an adversary does not believe you are ready to attack. Accordingly, the United States appears to have decided to play Russia’s game and talk with Moscow in an analogous “escalate to de-escalate” language. This, in turn, has been highlighted by the Kremlin as a way to sustain anti-American hysteria among the Russian public.

¹ [Polina Sinovets](#) is Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at Mechnikov National University, Odessa, Ukraine.

The Prospect of Strategic Stability

Aiming for “nuclear zero,” a world free of nuclear weapons, can be dismissed as an option. It tends to be presented as a mandatory courtesy to international codes of conduct. The reality is that as U.S.-Russian tensions grow, the United States is reacting to Russia’s military plans and challenges. The United States thus lowered the nuclear threshold and is developing new types of miniaturized nuclear warheads, such as sea launched ballistic and cruise missiles (SLBMs and SLCMs). This kind of deterrence, however, always has the potential to spiral in harmful directions.

The theoretical readiness of the United States to use nuclear weapons in a conflict with Russia may indeed deter Moscow, but it might also prompt the two to engage in a regional nuclear conflict. This brings us back to the strategic stability issue. Can Russian early warning systems differentiate an SLBM with a miniaturized nuclear warhead (supposedly now under development in Russia) from one carrying a “standard” nuclear warhead that has the yield of more than one megaton? Frank Miller, president of the Scowcroft Group, [suggests](#) that if Russian duty officers see only one such missile on their displays instead of many, indicating a massive nuclear strike, they may draw the conclusion that the warhead is low-nuclear-yield and was probably launched for purely de-escalatory [purposes](#). However as the famous Russian proverb says, “fear has many eyes,” so it is quite logical that the notorious human factor (analytical error) may play a crucially destabilizing role.

Using fear and “rational” attempts to demonize the United States has become a classic weapon of Russian information warfare. In this respect, the U.S. NPR has already become the object of criticism by those Russians who routinely find ways to blame Washington for breaking down strategic stability (as it strives for world dominance).

Putin’s speech to the Federal Assembly [contained](#) the passage: “We did our best to dissuade the Americans from withdrawing from the [Anti-Ballistic Missile] treaty. All in vain.” The result: Putin introduced four types of new strategic nuclear weapons theoretically able to penetrate any type of missile defenses. Through these weapons, the Russian president showed the seriousness of Moscow’s perception of U.S. global power projection (even though his speech was most probably [given](#) for domestic consumption considering it was close to the presidential elections). Russia having nuclear superiority, however, cannot be considered realistic under the current circumstances, even if the weapons Putin introduced were operational – they are not and will probably need years in development.

Peering through the doctrinal language, two facts are unchanged. First, the operational capabilities and the level of spending on research and development by the United States will always keep it more capable than Russia. Second, no matter how many times over the United States can destroy Russia, Moscow will always have the ability to destroy the

United States, and Russia's newest weapon types are meant to ensure that it retains this capability. The significance is that Russia and the United States are embarking on a substantial nuclear arms race, which inevitably affects strategic stability. Important but unknown cards in this dynamic are Moscow's and Washington's future attitudes and actions in crisis situations as well as views regarding the destiny of arms control treaties, which are unsettled.

The Future of Arms Control Treaties

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) has been under threat over the last couple of years due to Russia testing the *RS-26 "Rubezh"* missile as well as its deployment in 2017 of the *SSC-8*, an INF-banned, land-based, cruise missile.

Fortunately, recent news is rather reassuring. The chances of preserving the INF look a bit better this year than last year. First, the United States spared the INF in its 2018 NPR; certain limitations on ground-based cruise missiles were preserved. Second, Russia [announced](#) that the *RS-26* was not included in its States Armament Program 2018-27. This is because Russia chose to give priority to its new *Avangard* hypersonic system. Keeping the INF not only prevents European NATO members from being involved in the deployment of intermediate range missiles, it also still stands as a symbol of the end of the Cold War (the 1987 INF Treaty was the first treaty "ending" the Cold War).

However, one should not overestimate the role of the INF given that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) is much more important. This document looks to be endangered at the moment. By the end of this year, both the United States and Russia will seek to reach the agreed compliance on the quantities of arms deployed. But compliance is considered viable only if both states endorse it for each other. Today, Russia denies that the United States is in compliance with certain conditions of New START (which entered into force in 2011). For example, Russia says that the United States [converted](#) a number of SLBM *Trident II* launchers and *B-52 H* bombers in a way that does not make them incapable.

If START will not be extended then we risk returning to the situation of the pre-nuclear arms control era, with no mutual verification methods or transparency about strategic arsenals, a nuclear arms race, and the domination of instability. Strategic stability would probably lose its importance, giving way to the idea of gaining strategic superiority and waging dialogue from positions of power. In short, as evidenced by the START process being unsettled, there are significant concerns connected with the ideological dimensions of contemporary Russian and U.S. nuclear policies.

Escalate to De-escalate?

One of the main conceptual drivers of the new U.S. NPR is the so-called Russian doctrine of “escalation for de-escalation,” which Moscow officially rejects. Certain public relations and research campaigns have been unrolled in recent times in Russia to deny the existence of such a policy. The main angle from the Russian side is that the United States has taken this principle from its own strategy and has mistakenly attributed it to Moscow, and/or that this concept is outdated and was only in the Russian Military Doctrine of 2000. There is likely a definition problem here. An “escalation for de-escalation” strategy is simply having the possibility to use weapons, in this case nuclear, with the aim of coercing an adversary to step back from warfare, for example during a hypothetical regional conflict between Russia and its neighbors.

By examining the Russian Military Doctrine of 2014, we find that it [states](#), “nuclear weapons will stay as an important factor to prevent the eruption of military nuclear conflicts as well as conflicts using conventional means of destruction (large scale war, regional war).” This statement looks credible enough to persuade potential adversaries that Moscow is willing to use its nuclear weapons in a regional war. The 2014 Doctrine is not as precise as the 2000 Doctrine about the cases and aims of using nuclear weapons, but conceptually it follows the main principles of the earlier one. The 2000 Doctrine outlines de-escalation “principles” through several [statements](#), including, “...to create the prerequisites for ending the war or armed conflict or for bringing it to an end at an early stage; to neutralize the aggressor and achieve a settlement on terms according with the interests of the Russian Federation and its allies.”

Another piece of indirect evidence of Russia’s “escalation for de-escalation” strategy can be tracked to the official position of the Russian Embassy in the United States. Information from its representatives indicates that the Russian Federation is ready to use nuclear weapons in two cases. One of them is when the existence of the state is under threat (in accordance with the 2014 doctrine), and the other, which is unwritten but widely vocalized, is when the territorial integrity of Russia is under threat. This message was shared by representatives from the Russian Embassy several times at events analyzing the latest U.S. NPR held by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, CSIS, and the National Defense University (in January and February 2018). The offered clauses sound very close to the meaning of “escalation for de-escalation.” This brings up, for instance, Crimea, which could be a pretext for the use of nuclear weapons in case Russia would lose control of it through Western intervention. Speaking of Crimea, it is [mentioned](#) four times in the recent NPR, with one passage being: “The United States and Russia have in the past maintained strategic dialogues to manage nuclear competition and nuclear risks. Given Russian actions, including its occupation of Crimea, this constructive engagement has declined substantially. We look forward to conditions that would once again allow for transparent and constructive engagement with Russia.”

Conclusion

Although it is true that only four countries have their own subsections in the U.S. NPR (Iran, North Korea, China, and Russia), perspective should not be lost and misperceptions should not be spread. Russia has used the new U.S. NPR to allow traditional Russian paranoid perceptions to persist. A case in point involves the U.S. missile defense system in Europe, which for years Russia has been saying undermines its deterrence capabilities and likewise global strategic stability—and now Moscow has been pointing at the recent Review as only further hampering both. Although many such statements are intended as negotiation points, the Kremlin continues to employ strategies of disproportionately demonizing the United States. When it comes to nuclear weapon development and arms control, misperceptions—particularly purposeful misperceptions—only add more clouds over the future of strategic stability.

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