

Crisis Stability in the Twenty-First Century

Discussion Paper for a Track II Dialogue on U.S.-Russian Crisis Stability

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Introduction

This paper defines crisis stability, places it into a broad historical context, and outlines some of its challenges today. For the purposes of our discussion, “crisis stability” is a state in which parties to a confrontation do not have incentives to preempt or escalate, either as a result of mutual deterrence, mutual confidence, or for other reasons.²

A crisis is an intermediate point between peace and war. In a crisis, opponents may use coercive signaling through threats, changes in force postures, and manipulated alert levels, alongside diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation while advancing their interests. However, seemingly routine actions taken by both sides to prepare their respective military forces for a possible war could conflict with the political steps taken to prevent it. Their military establishments’ innate desire to exploit surprise and achieve decisive effects early in a conflict could add further preemptive and escalatory pressures.

During the Cold War, crisis stability was generally understood by U.S. and Soviet experts as “first strike stability” in the strategic nuclear context and, together with arms race stability, was viewed as a component of bilateral “strategic stability.”³ But, crisis stability was also one of the associated goals of “crisis management,” a framework of political and military approaches to restrain preemption in a crisis, especially one that could escalate to nuclear use.

In today’s security environment, a variety of new technologies force us to rethink the components of crisis stability beyond the purely military realm, to include the implications of cyber threats and information and communication activities. At the same time, military activities and force plans, nuclear and conventional, are also evolving while some of the constraints that have helped contribute

¹ This paper was written in September 2017, when Dr. Fink was an adjunct at the RAND Corporation.

² Tom Schelling referred to a lack of confidence in crisis as reciprocal anxiety and “amplification by positive feedback.” Thomas C. Schelling, “Confidence in Crisis,” *International Security*, 8/4, 1984, 56.

³ Alexei Arbatov, Vladimir Dvorkin, Alexander Pikaev, and Sergey Oznobishchev, *Strategic Stability after the Cold War* (MEMO RAN, 2010), 14.

to stability in the past are in danger of disappearing. What, then, does crisis stability mean today and into the future, and what steps can be taken to strengthen it?

Historical Context

In 1948, the first Berlin Crisis marked the beginning of several crises that threatened to escalate to direct armed confrontations involving U.S. and Soviet forces in Europe. The second 1958–1961 crisis culminated in the construction of the Berlin Wall. The powers that occupied Berlin sought to manage smaller incidents and provide predictability through mechanisms like the Military Liaison Missions and joint air traffic management in the Berlin access corridors.

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (or the Caribbean Crisis) was the first major bilateral incident where Moscow and Washington were faced with the prospect of a nuclear confrontation. In its aftermath, the two sides inaugurated a Direct Communication Link (the 1963 Hotline Agreement), facilitated the use of national technical means for monitoring each other, and built more secure second-strike forces to reduce concerns about a surprise nuclear first strike. Both U.S. and Soviet/Russian experts have noted the catalytic role of the crisis in stimulating these activities.⁴

In addition, there were persistent concerns that a nuclear conflict could arise as a result of nuclear proliferation to third countries or through inadvertence (as a result of misperception) or accident (as a result of force control failure). The 1969 Sino-Soviet border dispute (which also coincided with a major nuclear alert by the United States over Vietnam), the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, and the 1983 Able Archer exercise, among other incidents, all tested U.S. and Soviet leaders' crisis-management skills. By the mid-1980s, U.S. experts usually argued that a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union was unlikely to take place as a result of a surprise attack, and that pathways like escalation of a conventional conflict, preemption in a crisis, accidental or unauthorized nuclear use, or initiation by a third party were more probable.⁵ Soviet experts similarly noted the potential nuclear dangers that could arise from the "technical aspects of deterrence."⁶

During the 1970s and 1980s, bilateral efforts aimed at preventing nuclear war sometimes resulted in treaties and institutionalized communications mechanisms as well as restrictions on military forces and their routine practices.⁷ These included "structural" arms control, including SALT I and II accords, the 1972 ABM Treaty, and the 1987 INF Treaty. There was also "operational" arms control, consisting of so-called confidence-building or risk-reduction measures, which intended to build confidence or reduce anxiety in a crisis and maybe even contribute to long-run stabilization.⁸ Such "operational" measures included the 1971 Agreement on Measures to Reduce the Risk of Outbreak of Nuclear War;

⁴ Viktor Yesin, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Debatable Issues, Instructive Lessons," Belfer Center, 2013.

⁵ Joseph Nye, "Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures and U.S.-Soviet Relations," in Barry Blechman, ed. *Preventing Nuclear War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 11–12.

⁶ Sergei Y. Tikhonov, "A Soviet View," in Joseph E. Nation, ed., *The De-Escalation of Nuclear Crises* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

⁷ There were also successful efforts to restrain nuclear testing and proliferation of nuclear technology.

⁸ In terms of design, "operational" measures could involve declaratory policy (unilateral or joint), information exchanges (i.e., on size and location of forces), communication links, access or on-site inspections, notifications (which permit activities, but attach reporting requirements), and rules of the road/restraint (which ban or discourage certain military activities).

the 1972 Incidents at Sea (INCSEA) agreement; the 1988 Agreement on Notifications of ICBM and SLBM Launches; and the 1989 Managing Dangerous Activities (MDA) agreement. The U.S.-Soviet Direct Communication Link (the 1963 Hotline Agreement) was continuously modernized to include satellite, fax, and other capabilities. In 1987, the two sides also created the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers to facilitate information exchanges, especially with regard to nuclear force reductions under the 1991 START I, the 2002 Moscow Treaty, and the 2010 New START treaty, but also information exchange regarding cybersecurity incidents.

In addition to U.S.-Soviet engagement, there were concomitant East-West efforts in Europe to shape military force postures as well as to introduce transparency and predictability of conventional military activities. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1986 Stockholm Accord provided the foundation for the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, the Vienna Document series on confidence and security-building measures in Europe, and the Open Skies Treaty. At the end of the Cold War, there was a body of thought and practice with regard to political-military approaches to managing and possibly even preventing crises.

Crisis Management and Prevention

Successful management of a crisis, especially one that carries the risk of nuclear escalation, imposes various stresses on a country's government apparatus. Andrei Kokoshin has suggested that crisis management "requires special concentration and will from the leaders; special mechanisms for the collection, processing and reporting of information to the leadership; special control of the activities of the country's forces; special instructions for ambassadors and military attachés; a special regime of communication with the national and the foreign mass media, and many other things."⁹

Alexander George focused specifically on the need for deconflicting military and political responses during crises. He recommended: (1) maintaining strict political control over military options and military force movements; (2) slowing down tempo of military activities; (3) coordinating political and military activities to control escalation; (4) avoiding "noise" in threats; (5) avoiding signals of preparation for large-scale warfare; (6) ensuring compatibility of political-military strategy with peaceful crisis resolution; and (7) providing off-ramps that are consistent with fundamental interest of opponent.¹⁰

Crisis prevention is another approach to reducing the risk of nuclear war. As one of the key goals of the 1972 U.S.-Soviet détente process, crisis prevention focused on U.S.-Soviet efforts to moderate

⁹ He also posited that "crisis management mechanisms may exist on a reciprocal basis only if there is an appropriate material component of the military and strategic equilibrium and if the availability of such a material component is proficiently demonstrated on a regular basis." Andrei A. Kokoshin, "Ensuring Strategic Stability in the Past and Present: Theoretical and Applied Questions," Belfer Center, 2011, 31.

¹⁰ George has also written of the "basic paradox and dilemma of crisis management" as follows: "The paradox is that there need be no crisis if one side is willing to forego its objectives and accept damage to the interests at stake. The dilemma, in turn, arises from a desire to do what may be necessary to protect one's most important interests, but, at the same time, to avoid actions that may result in undesired costs and risks." Alexander George, "Crisis Management: The Interaction of Political and Military Considerations," *Survival*, 26:5, 224.

their competition, especially in situations where their vital interests were not at stake. In concept, it relied on traditional European great-power efforts to moderate their rivalries and avoid crises.¹¹

As the Cold War ended, and the prospect of a nuclear crisis between Washington and Moscow receded, intellectual efforts to buttress “crisis stability” largely fell by the wayside. There were hopes that the relationship could be fundamentally transformed away from a nuclear deterrence paradigm. Most of the policy emphasis shifted to reducing strategic nuclear forces and, in turn, scholarship focused on “strategic stability” and the prospects of deeper nuclear cuts. This was the case until the Ukraine crisis suggested the need to revisit past efforts.

U.S./NATO-Russian Relations and Resulting Challenges

Across the Euro-Atlantic region, stakeholders have markedly different views about what happened in the post-Cold War period that contributed to the Ukraine conflict and the present low point in security relations.¹² However, in their descriptions of the current state of U.S.-Russian and NATO-Russian relations, U.S. and Russian experts agree that the risk of military conflict between the United States and Russia is the highest it has been since the end of the Cold War. Some (younger) Russian observers even note that the risk could even be higher than it was during the Cold War.¹³

Ongoing changes in U.S./NATO and Russian conventional postures and their respective deterrence, assurance, and other military activities contribute to an ever-present risk of armed conflict. Observers have pointed to close encounters between military aircraft and Russia’s buzzing of naval vessels as activities that could lead to a political-military crisis. Some have proposed regional measures, such as sub-regional arms control for the Baltic area, or omnibus risk-reduction approaches that effectively make INCSEAs and MDAs multilateral agreements.¹⁴ There have also been efforts to lower the notification thresholds in the Vienna Document, create crisis-management mechanisms, and initiate a discussion of conventional arms-control issues that incorporate new systems of concern. It’s clear from the example of Syria, where the United States and Russia maintain a direct communication line to deconflict air operations, that risk-reduction engagement is possible if both parties consider it in the interest of mutual security. However, it appears that, at least as of yet, a critical mass of stakeholders does not consider that to be the case in the Euro-Atlantic.

There is also a significant danger that the U.S.-Russian consensus on reducing the risk of nuclear war could collapse in its entirety. The demise of bilateral efforts to reduce the risks of nuclear terrorism serves as an unfortunate precedent in this regard. The difficult process of adapting to changes in “strategic stability,” with Russian and U.S. nuclear and dual-capable modernization efforts as a backdrop, is creating arms race dynamics. The inability to resolve the INF Treaty dispute has contributed to concerns that the New START agreement may not be extended. There are also other

¹¹ Alexander George, ed., *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry: Problems of Crisis Prevention* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1983).

¹² See, for example, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Back to Diplomacy: Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project,” November 2015.

¹³ Alexey Fenenko, “Worse Than During the Cold War,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 30, 2016.

¹⁴ Proposals have been made by the European Leadership Network and the Deep Cuts Commission, among others.

challenges to crisis stability that are not confined to the U.S./NATO-Russian relationship, and instead exist or have feedback effects in chains of political-military relationships among them and other nuclear-armed states.

Broader Challenges for Crisis Stability

In discussing challenges to “strategic stability,” experts usually argue that first-strike stability may increasingly come under threat as new capabilities—cyber, counter-space, precision-strike, and missile defense—become integrated into military operations. In a crisis, electronic, cyber, and counter-space capabilities are likely to be used first, especially since they may provide a decisive advantage while resulting in fewer casualties than from kinetic capabilities. Their employment in tandem with conventional precision strike on command-and-control targets may also create incentives for nuclear first use. Deterrence with regard to these systems has proven conceptually difficult, and there are no limits on targeting and no clear rules of the road that could dampen escalatory pressures.

Another technological dimension is the continued proliferation of ballistic and cruise missile technologies as well as the development of hypersonic systems. All of these dual-capable platforms are well suited for preemptive use on command-and-control systems and critical targets. In some cases, they may also be used for signaling in a crisis, raising dangers that one side may misunderstand the other side’s efforts to de-escalate. In turn, air/missile defense systems may destabilize dynamics by giving a false sense of confidence to one side and fueling vulnerability concerns in another. Newly emerging technologies, especially ones that rely on robotics and automation, may further complicate crisis dynamics.

The evolution and spread of information and communication technologies is also an important issue with an impact on crisis stability. Russian experts have long pointed to their concern with these technologies’ ability to destabilize a sovereign state by, *inter alia*, empowering individuals and groups. Until more recently, this notion has been alien to their U.S. counterparts, at least with regard to domestic politics. The rapid diffusion of information also contributes to “echo chambers” that, along with “fake news” and the decline of authoritative media, erode confidence as well as move public and leader opinions. The ability of political leaders to message through social media bypasses bureaucratic safeguards and may promote misperception in a crisis.

Still another key issue is the erosion of norms and institutions around nuclear weapons, highlighted by the crises involving North Korea and the Iran nuclear deal. Related to this, Western support for regime change in Libya and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may have reinforced the unattractiveness of nuclear renunciation.¹⁵ In addition, U.S. and Russian leaders have also used nuclear threats in recent past, potentially making this behavior less aberrant for others. Some Russian observers have also argued that the end of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control, coupled with the continued U.S. refusal to ratify the

¹⁵ See, for example, Andrei Lankov, “North Korea Will Never Give Up Its Nuclear Weapons,” NK News, July 29, 2013; and Mariana Budjeryn, “Was Ukraine’s Nuclear Disarmament a Blunder?,” *World Affairs*, September 2016.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, could further destabilize multilateral nonproliferation frameworks, including the Non-Proliferation Treaty.¹⁶

Finally, present-day crises take place within the context of a turbulent global governance environment. Some note the decline of U.S. dominance as well as potentially the decline of the rules-based international order that was created after World War II.¹⁷ In the past, great powers could agree on certain issues that pertained to their mutual security, but building a modicum of consensus among large and middle powers may be a tall order. Moreover, rising nationalism, domestic unrest, and economic inequality in many states, coupled with the effects of a changing climate, will make crises not just more difficult to manage, but also much more difficult to predict.

The Way Ahead for Discussion

Given these existing and emerging challenges to crisis stability, what are some of the approaches to crisis prevention and crisis management in the twenty-first century? Political approaches to crisis prevention could include creating better relations and communication mechanisms so that differences do not blossom into crises. Crises could also be avoided through structural-institutional approaches such as force changes that minimize first-strike advantages, rules of the road, transparency and predictability measures, agreements, and other efforts to make escalation less advantageous, and thus less likely. Managing crises also has political and structural-institutional dimensions. Once a crisis is underway, the crux of crisis management is to ensure that intentions (ideally, intentions to avoid escalation) are clear, that actions and words are not misunderstood, and that off-ramps acceptable to both parties are available.

The challenge for dialogues that hope to contribute to crisis stability in this changing environment is to define political and structural-institutional approaches to both crisis prevention and crisis management in the context of not just nuclear developments, but also developments in the conventional, space, cyber, information, and missile defense spheres, in an evolving global governance environment.

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¹⁶ A. G. Arbatov, "Sistema kontrolya nad vooruzheniyami v stadii poluraspada?," Primakov Readings remarks, November 28–30, 2016.

¹⁷ See, for example, Michael J. Mazarr, "The Once and Future Order," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2017.