The Sword and the Shield
Toward U.S.-Russian Strategic Compatibility

KEITH DARDEN & TIMOFEI BORDACHEV

Working Group Paper 4
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us-russiafuture.org
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The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations convenes rising experts from leading American and Russian institutions to tackle the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. By engaging the latest generation of scholars in face-to-face discussion and debate, we aim to generate innovative analysis and policy recommendations that better reflect the common ground between the United States and Russia that is so often obscured by mistrust. We believe our unique, truly bilateral approach offers the best potential for breakthroughs in mutual understanding and reconciliation between our countries.

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Executive summary

The world has changed significantly in the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, but for both Russia and the United States, security continues to depend in part on the deterrent effect of the immense nuclear arsenals acquired during the Cold War. The primary existential threat remains the possibility of a nuclear attack, but the immediate risk has diminished significantly. In its place, a new security landscape with new potential threats has emerged. The ascendance of a more powerful China, the increased ability of other states to project power beyond their borders, and the superiority of the United States in conventional warfare present new opportunities and dangers that were not considered during the less complicated environment of the early Cold War, when much of our thinking on nuclear strategy and U.S.-Russia relations first evolved.

The capabilities of the two countries and their potential rivals have also changed dramatically in the past twenty-five years. Russia’s security portfolio has shifted to a nearly exclusive reliance on the use of offensive nuclear capabilities as a deterrent to potential adversaries, with compact conventional forces serviceable to defend national interests on the immediate periphery. The United States has enhanced its conventional capabilities and begun to pursue more active development of ballistic missile defenses. These changes render much of the Cold War thinking obsolete and necessitate a fundamental reevaluation of arms control and security policy in the U.S.-Russia relationship.

This paper provides a fresh look at that relationship in the areas of military and strategic cooperation, particularly in nuclear strategy and forces. Our intent is to provide a practical, realistic assessment to guide U.S.-Russia relations in the short term. Any viable security strategy must account for these changes, which render the traditional arms-control path of symmetrical reductions of nuclear forces untenable. Specifically, we suggest that the focus on “nuclear parity” and “strategic stability” through a secure second-strike nuclear capability, which guided much of the Cold War, should be replaced with the goal of achieving “strategic compatibility” based on very different force structures for Russia and the United States. “Strategic compatibility” implies the ability of partners to assure their optimal force and offensive strengths without undermining each other’s defense capacity, thus providing a solid background for strategic stability, even in the absence of trust. Reliance on a first-strike nuclear capability, missile defenses, launch-on-warning systems, and other security policies considered destabilizing during the heightened tensions of the Cold War are much more stabilizing in the current context, and would be feasible ways to reduce nuclear arsenals while providing greater security and transparency. This paper draws the following conclusions:
• Nuclear arsenals should be limited to robust offensive capability. With contemporary launch-detection abilities and even minimal transparency in the relationship between the United States and Russia, a limited offensive nuclear capability—sufficient to inflict unacceptable losses on multiple adversaries, but not necessarily after a surprise counterforce strike—is more than sufficient for stable deterrence.

• Missile defenses, even if developed unilaterally, need not be destabilizing if both sides accept that symmetry of forces is unrealistic and unnecessary.

• Strategic compatibility, not parity, will provide security.

• Symmetrical reductions of nuclear forces no longer have symmetrical effects on Russian and U.S. security. Enhanced security for both countries is attainable in the short term if the United States and Russia develop differing but compatible security portfolios, with the United States strengthening defenses (both conventional and ballistic missile) and Russia primarily focused on maintaining a robust offensive nuclear capability as a deterrent. These would effectively provide security for both countries through defense or deterrence against third parties and against each other.

• Transparency enhances security. A clear awareness of each country’s capabilities and how they are being deployed, and a system for early warning of their use, would promote the security of both nations.

The introduction places the underlying principles for the strategic stability achieved during the Cold War in a broad historical context that reveals the period from 1945 to 1989 to be anomalous. A parsimonious review of important conflicts reveals that the present array of threats and resources resembles more the situation before 1945 than afterward. Part One reviews the Cold War security arrangements; Part Two highlights the changes in the international security environment since 1989 that have rendered the Cold War strategies of security provision obsolete. Part Three outlines an approach to achieve security through compatibility of strategies rather than parity, in particular the coordination of U.S. missile defenses with the preservation of each country’s capacity for an effective nuclear strike as a stable deterrent.
Introduction: The Cold War in historical perspective

Despite the recent aggravation of tension between Russia and the United States, the Cold War is over. And yet the thinking and the international political system forged during that era remain accepted reference points for most contemporary writing on the U.S.-Russia security relationship. Even those who propose new models of international security refer to the Cold War because the technical parameters (nuclear weapons) and political/legal parameters of mutual deterrence were created during this period of nuclear confrontation. In fact, the U.S.-Soviet interaction during the Cold War was grounded in a unique environment that no longer exists and was highly anomalous. Our current search for stable and durable security arrangements could be productively informed by historical precedent.

The Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States had certain characteristics that distinguished it from conflicts pre-dating it by hundreds and even thousands of years:

• Superpower competition was based on (newfound) lethal enmity.
• Each side had the unquestioned ability to annihilate the other.
• The USSR and the United States had relatively symmetrical power and force.
• The rivals faced a limited number of other security threats.

In contrast, in most historical rivalries:

Conflicts have been characterized by long-standing, but not lethal enmity. Relations between great powers have been adversarial, but not characterized by “lethal enmity”—rivals did not insist that their rivals had no right to exist. Examples include the balancing powers of the nineteenth century; the European powers of the eighteenth century; participants in the Thirty Years War; Britain, France, and Spain in the sixteenth century; Rome versus Parthia, and the Egyptians versus the Hittites.

Countries could not annihilate their adversaries. Opposing sides did not have the ability to totally annihilate the populations of their enemies. Rather, adversarial relations and the mutual (negative) recognition implied became the basis for negotiated peace in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and in the creation of the Vienna system in 1815. These systems proved adept at sustaining peace for a century or more. (Regional wars did occur, but they did not lead to major revisions in the international system.)
The balance of forces between potential adversaries was not based on symmetry. Important military rivalries have been grounded in what could be termed complementary asymmetry. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, Britain relied on overwhelming naval power to deter the French threat of a ground-based invasion—much as Athens had once deterred Sparta; in the Seven Years’ War (1754–1763), Prussia under Frederick the Great, with 2.5 million citizens, resisted Louis XV’s France, with its population of 24 million. A similar imbalance in forces characterized the rivalry between the forces of the Roman Empire (350,000) and those of Parthia (an army of 60,000), though the latter’s armed cavalry compensated for the lack of men.

Countries have faced multiple security threats. Rather than from a single enemy, threats have come from many directions. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was attacked by France and Prussia; earlier, Louis XIV had expected France to be attacked from the south, the east, and the northwest. This pattern had held true in ancient times as well, when the Parthians worried about Roman Syria and tribal attacks from the east and north, and Egypt defended itself against both Hittites and Libyan nomads.

The stability of the Cold War was a unique phenomenon engendered not by the destructive power of nuclear weapons but by ideological opposition. This confrontation determined the first and probably the most important distinctive feature that made the Cold War fundamentally different from other system conflicts in the international environment: “lethal enmity” was a cornerstone of the U.S.-USSR interaction. While rigorous clashes of ideologies are not new in the history of international relations, the Cold War was the first time each side considered disappearance of the rival as the final aim of their foreign policy and actually had the capability to achieve this almost instantly. This mix of ideological antagonism and power to annihilate the foe at any time (which in conditions of strategic parity also meant self-annihilation) made the bipolarity of the Cold War less flexible compared to other international systems. For U.S.-Soviet relations, it meant stability—so long as both sides were able to support strategic balance.

Given that the present international environment more closely resembles long-standing historical patterns established long before the Cold War, the search for stable, bilateral security arrangements should be informed by current conditions:

- Russia and the United States are more adversarial than was once hoped, but neither side believes the other should not exist.
- Neither side believes annihilating the other would improve global security.
- Bilateral relations are no longer based on “security through symmetry.”
- Russia and the United States face multiple security threats, some of which are shared (e.g., the rise of China, terrorism by nonstate actors, violence generated by separatist movements around the world, piracy, environmental challenges, drug trafficking, and epidemics).

1 Lethal enmity, as we are using the term here, also characterized the relationship between Nazi Germany and the USSR but did not encompass all of the great powers, and the relationship did not last long enough to constitute a system.
Theories of nuclear deterrence were developed in the early stages of the Cold War in a very peculiar strategic setting. In the 1950s, both the United States and the Soviet Union believed that their opponent was committed to destroying them entirely. The technology of the time made a surprise attack relatively difficult to detect, and a counterforce strike could be highly effective in knocking out the ability of a state to retaliate effectively with nuclear weapons.

Early theorists of nuclear deterrence in the United States considered these conditions highly unstable, due to not hostile intentions or the antagonistic relationship with the USSR (which they simply took for granted) but the vulnerability of nuclear forces to a surprise counterforce strike. This vulnerability gave each side an incentive to strike first. A classified 1947 Joint Chiefs of Staff evaluation identified a surprise counterforce attack as the primary threat to U.S. security. NSC-68, the defining U.S. strategy document of the early Cold War, saw “great advantage in initiative and surprise” in nuclear warfare. In one of the most influential views of the period, Albert Wohlstetter described the United States and the USSR as being in a strategic setting similar to two gunfighters who, in a kill-or-be-killed situation, would need to shoot first to survive. Thomas Schelling framed the situation as an unwanted encounter in which survival was at stake and each side might have an incentive to strike first in “self-defense” to disable the opponent. It became accepted that the United States and the USSR would have to “use or lose” nuclear arsenals in a crisis, and that this encouraged their use. These opinions were reflected in both scholarly writing and classified U.S. government assessments.

Compared to the U.S. understanding of nuclear capability’s role in the bilateral balance of power, the Soviet view was much simpler in the early Cold War. Nuclear weapons were considered just a new type of bomb with huge destructive potential, necessary to obtain, but hardly able to change the character of war. Moscow was primarily concerned that the U.S. nuclear monopoly endangered its troops in Eastern Europe and threatened the USSR’s territory, and rendered the United States almost impregnable. The Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons resolved this strategic problem and drove the two powers to a dangerous balance at the edge of an abyss.

By the early 1950s, U.S. strategists envisioned the primary solution to this problem as the establishment and preservation of a “secure second-strike capability,” the ability to survive a counterforce strike and still have sufficient resources to retaliate effectively. NSC-162/2 pointed out as early as 1953 that U.S.-Soviet strategic relations would be stabilized

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if force structures could render a counterforce strike unsuccessful. The Killian report, commissioned by President Eisenhower and issued in February 1955, envisioned a period beginning in the mid-1960s in which the United States and the USSR would be in a position from which neither country can derive a winning advantage, because each country will possess enough multi-megaton weapons and adequate means of delivering them ... [that] the ability to achieve surprise will not affect the outcome because each country will have the residual offensive power to break through the defenses of the other country and destroy it regardless of whether the other country strikes first.

The Gaither Committee of 1957 reaffirmed the view that deterrence would depend not on a raw balance of nuclear forces but on secure second-strike capability. By the 1958 Surprise Attack Conference, this central idea had become enshrined and formalized in the broader community of U.S. analysts and policy makers. Schelling expressed it with typical clarity in his own paper for the conference, later published as “The Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack”:

It is not the “balance”—the sheer equality or symmetry in the situation—that constitutes “mutual deterrence”; it is the stability of the balance. The situation is symmetrical but not stable when either side, by striking first, can destroy the other’s power to strike back; the situation is stable when either side can destroy the other whether it strikes first or second—that is, when neither in striking first can destroy the other’s ability to strike back.

Although the goal was not articulated as “strategic stability” until the 1970s, studies from the 1950s on consistently maintained that the solution to the problem of surprise attack was altering the force structures to make the weapons less vulnerable, thereby limiting the incentive to strike first. This equation of stability with second-strike ability remained the touchstone of U.S. nuclear strategy for the rest of the Cold War and beyond.

Soviet strategists never bothered themselves with fundamental doctrinal documents of the type circulating in the United States, and the discussion of foreign and defense policy always was classified, with a limited number of decision makers and experts taking part. That is not to suggest that there was not doctrine, or at least a common core understanding, behind Soviet nuclear strategy. Political leaders and the military establishment were strongly influenced by World War II: Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and all the defense ministers of the Soviet Union except the last—Yevgeny Shaposhnikov—endured that war. That fact determined the Soviet understanding of nuclear capabilities. The USSR’s military doctrine, which never had a wide theoretical basis, did not need a separate nuclear strategy;

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4 Cited in Gerson, “The Origins of Strategic Stability,” 16. The report was officially the product of the Technological Capabilities Panel of the Science Advisory Committee, Office of Defense Management. The panel was chaired by Eisenhower’s science advisor, James R. Killian.
5 Schelling, “Foreword,” vi.
strategic and nonstrategic elements were inseparable parts of the country’s readiness for a new global conflict. In a way, it was a continuation of the early Cold War mind-set: while nuclear weapons become more powerful and their role in a potential conflict grew, they retained their status in Soviet strategy as just another very powerful weapon. Any scenario of a global war included a massive strike with conventional weapons, despite the fact that in the nuclear age there might be nothing to occupy.

However, Moscow also showed the ability and desire for coexistence. The Caribbean crisis perfectly demonstrated that although it was preparing for the new world war, the USSR was not going to start it. That meant that Soviet leaders had come to the same conclusion as their American counterparts—“strategic stability” was the only option to ensure national security for both sides. In the Soviet view, the United States and the USSR were not engaged in a collaborative strategy of mutually assured destruction; they were simply being deterred by each other’s strong military capabilities.

Most aspects of U.S. nuclear strategy, as well as the American approach to international arms control negotiations, were based on this concept of strategic stability. Anything that would reduce the effectiveness of a second strike was seen as destabilizing. Parity in the size of U.S. and Soviet forces was seen as important because no first strike could be fully effective unless the number of attacking warheads was substantially greater than the number of targets—hence the need for arms control. Large-scale arsenals became important because it was necessary to have a sufficient number of deliverable warheads left after a surprise attack to deliver a punishing blow to the enemy. Indeed, Schelling, Halperin, and others in the late 1950s were anxious to see the Soviet Union reach parity with the United States so that the Soviets would have a secure second-strike capacity and thus less incentive to launch their nuclear weapons in a crisis. Finally, both U.S. and Soviet forces should be diverse and dispersed in order to be secure from a counterforce attack. The technological requirements varied; the first step was to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile force dispersed in hardened silos to complement the strategic bomber force, and then submarine-launched ballistic missiles would be the third leg of the “triad.” But the underlying principle remained the secure second strike.

The U.S. negotiating position in the major arms control initiatives was consistent with this goal. Anything that would increase the effectiveness of a surprise counterforce strike was seen as destabilizing, and anything that would increase the effectiveness of a second strike was seen as stabilizing. The U.S. approaches to the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) I and II, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) were all focused on achieving parity and the optimal scale to preserve deterrence. The objection to Soviet deployment of multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRVs), for example, was not that their potency shifted the strategic balance in the Soviets’ favor, but that they would increase the reward of striking first by virtue of their vulnerability; the strike of a single warhead would remove multiple MIRVed warheads,

7 Schelling and Halperin, Strategy and Arms Control. A sufficiently punishing blow was defined by MacNamara as destruction of 20–25 percent of the Soviet population and 50 percent of its industrial capacity. Yost, “Strategic Stability in the Cold War,” 15.

8 Schelling and Halperin, Strategy and Arms Control.

9 The Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was to “provide for equality both in limits and rights between the United States and the Soviet Union.”
making it more likely the latter would be launched pre-emptively or on warning. Missiles with greater speed and accuracy were considered destabilizing. Missiles that were difficult or impossible to target (mobile launchers, submarine-launched ballistic missiles) were stabilizing. Targeting nuclear missiles was destabilizing; targeting population centers was not. The USSR generally shared this approach, but not necessarily the reasoning behind it. Most negotiations led to a compromise, as in the case of SALT I.

**Antiballistic missile systems**

The resistance to antiballistic missile (ABM) defenses was driven by the goal of preserving the “strategic stability” provided by a secure second strike. The U.S. resistance that culminated in the 1972 treaty was based on the concern that such systems would limit the effectiveness of a second strike, not that they would ever be sufficient against a first strike.\(^{10}\) The USSR was quick to show interest in limiting antiballistic missile systems to minimize their negative effect on the strategic balance. ABM systems might be able to defend against a small arsenal (such as the one held by China at that time), but in the U.S.-Soviet relationship would simply raise the number of missiles required to survive an attack and then penetrate enemy defenses. The prospect of defending against a Soviet first strike was always considered a chimera. When ABM systems were first discussed within the U.S. government in the mid-1960s, they were judged to give no strategic advantage in the Cold War relationship, to be perhaps temporarily destabilizing, and ultimately to increase the costs for both sides by forcing them to sustain arsenals at a higher equilibrium level.\(^{11}\) In a culture where the USSR and the United States posed the primary threat to each other, it was not difficult to agree on limiting the development of ABM systems that had no hope of being effective.

But the American concept of achieving strategic stability through a mutually assured second strike was never shared by the Soviet strategists during the Cold War. The Soviets continued to develop weapons that were designed to be more effective in a counterforce strike: faster, more accurate missiles with a high payload, located in areas that made them vulnerable to a first strike and therefore more likely to be launched on warning. These weapons were consistent with the “war-fighting” strategy that many attribute to the USSR during this period, and were destabilizing from an American perspective. Precise details of Soviet doctrine are more difficult to obtain than information on U.S. policies (now available in the public record), but the Soviets continued on a path that would limit the effectiveness of a U.S. second strike until the late 1980s. Contemporary Russian sources attribute Soviet interest in arms control in the 1970s not to an effort to achieve “strategic stability” or jointly limit the possibility of a nuclear launch. Rather, Antonov suggests that it was primarily driven by the achievement of nuclear parity and the arrival at an understanding that nuclear

\(^{10}\) Adler 1992.

\(^{11}\) “Memorandum from Director of Central Intelligence Holmes.”
supremacy was unattainable. Continued expenditure on nuclear weapons was of limited value, and agreements to maintain parity at lower (and less costly) levels were seen as an acceptable “second-best” option to dominance or victory.

Even if the USSR and the United States did not share a vision of strategic stability based on a secure “second strike” capability, the result of the arms buildup of the Cold War and its treaties was that each side possessed a large nuclear force that could presumably survive an initial counterforce attack and still deliver a nuclear strike with unacceptable losses. While this was not as stable, perhaps, as Schelling and others would have supposed (there were several crises, accidents, and near misses), the need to strike first to preserve one’s forces was arguably diminished to the point where it provided no incentive to initiate a nuclear conflict, even though relations between the two countries were hostile. Parity and symmetry of U.S. and Soviet forces were the key principles of each round of arms control negotiations.

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Part Two: The Post–Cold War security environment

As noted in the introduction, the post–Cold War security environment is quite unlike the early years of the Cold War. We explore the implications of three components of this new security environment: relatively improved relations between Russia and the United States; the rise of China and the presence of new threats; and the superiority of U.S. conventional warfare capabilities.

Improved relations

The most fundamental and significant changes have been in the strategic goals of Russia and the United States and in the nature of their relationship. Whereas the early Cold War was marked by open threats of annihilation and very limited information, the post–Cold War period has seen relatively more amicable relations under conditions of greater transparency. The risk of a surprise all-out nuclear counterforce strike by either party is so remote as to be useless as a starting point for planning policy.13 This is a particularly significant change, since that threat underpinned Cold War security policy from the beginning. As discussed below, many of the force structures required to ameliorate it are no longer necessary.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and up to the present time, the enmity between the United States and Russia has declined significantly. Even though today relations are cold, the two nations are no longer like scorpions trapped in a bottle (Oppenheimer)14 or gunfighters facing each other in a shootout (Wohlstetter), nor do they face a chance threatening encounter in the night (Schelling). They are more like unsociable (and well-armed) guests at a cocktail party, sharing little warmth but still careful not to let matters escalate to the point of lethal violence being used against each other.

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New threats

The United States and the USSR were the sole threats to each other during the Cold War, but both now exist in much more complex and quite different security situations. The threat environments of the two countries and the forces needed to respond are no longer symmetrical, and national security can no longer be ensured simply by preserving offensive nuclear capability. The requirements for Russian and U.S. security are not the same.

U.S. and Russian strategic interests have been affected differently by the rise in the capabilities of third parties, particularly China. China is perceived in the United States as not being a status quo power—it does not accept the finality of its current borders and has expanded its territory through purchase or conquest multiple times in recent decades. Unlike the United States, Russia shares a land border with China. China currently spends approximately double what Russia spends on its military and also dwarfs Russia in population and in the size, though apparently not the quality, of its conventional forces. Russia is theoretically vulnerable to China’s intermediate-range missiles while dismantling its own under INF treaty obligations with the United States. Relations with China are genuinely friendly today, but Russia will presumably require hidden deterrence through the possibility of nuclear punishment for the foreseeable future as a bulwark against potential Chinese expansion. This is a deterrent that serves both the United States and Russia, as the United States, at least officially, would like to see China develop stably within its current boundaries, and Russia wishes to preserve its territorial integrity. The Russian nuclear deterrent also could provide the basis for a more positive relationship with China than China has with its neighbors that lack a nuclear deterrent.

The United States experiences the rise of China quite differently. China’s conventional warfare capability and intermediate-range missiles do not pose a direct threat to U.S. territory, although China does possess a survivable long-range nuclear force that could strike the United States. Increased Chinese power has affected the United States primarily through the potential danger that China poses as a growing non–status quo power, as a cyber-security threat, and as a threat to U.S. allies and interests in the region. Chinese maritime boundary claims potentially jeopardize trade routes and control of resources as well as U.S. allies. The United States has an interest in the rise of an internationally integrated and peaceful China within its current borders, but China is only an existential problem because of its long-range offensive nuclear weapons. These can be sufficiently deterred through the threat of nuclear punishment. Like the Russian deterrent, this serves both the United States and Russia can be the basis for a more positive relationship with China by keeping aggressive efforts to alter the status quo in check. Unlike the more credible Russian deterrent, the U.S. nuclear deterrent may not extend to allies in the region, and it is not certain under what circumstances U.S. strategic forces would be employed.

The United States and Russia also experience other international changes quite differently in terms of interests and capabilities. Russia may not consider Iranian nuclear capability a threat because it is not likely to be targeted in the near term, but the United States and its allies see this as a major threat. Divergence is particularly salient in areas that could not be
considered “existential” threats. Although the sole existential threat faced by the United States is the possibility of a nuclear attack on its homeland by Russia or perhaps China, the United States seeks to provide security more broadly (and controversially) defined. This more expansive notion includes the prevention of more limited attacks on its homeland and its allies, the desire to prevent other states from acquiring territory through coercion or conquest (enforcing the international territorial status quo), limiting the ability of new states to acquire nuclear weapons and the ballistic missile technologies that would allow them to reach the homeland, preventing the development and use of weapons of mass destruction, and selective and occasional defense of human rights. The United States also seeks to expand and sustain the system of trade and property rights that is believed to underpin prosperity.

The United States has consistently demonstrated that it is a status quo power with respect to territory. It has not used military power to expand territorial control in over one hundred years and has no significant outstanding territorial claims. It has not coerced major powers in its own hemisphere (Brazil and Argentina), despite their lack of a nuclear deterrent and clear U.S. military superiority. Nonetheless, the United States is not a status quo power in all respects: a certain liberal evangelism and other principles of intervention raise the possibility that its military capacity will be used for regime change, “responsibility to protect” operations, and other targeted interventions abroad.

In this sense, the United States faces a much more complex security environment because it defines security more broadly than its own national survival and homeland defense. As a result, more phenomena are seen as threats to which the U.S. might wish to make a military response, and this is often considered potentially threatening to Russia or contrary to her interests.

Asymmetry in conventional capabilities

The United States and Russia increasingly bring to bear different resources in response to security threats. The symmetry in U.S. and Russian force structures has declined markedly in recent years as the United States has developed superior conventional war-fighting capability and Russia’s capacity has diminished. The United States has maintained and even enhanced a robust offensive conventional capability following the collapse of the USSR and is now the dominant world power in terms of both current capacity and overall spending. It is the only country able to project power against small and mid-range military forces across the globe. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has developed and deployed new conventional weapons systems (unmanned aerial vehicles, etc.) and shown willingness to use its offensive capability in several conflicts and for many purposes inconceivable during the Cold War. It has also committed substantial resources to missile defense since the end of the Cold War, especially following the abrogation of the 1972 ABM treaty.
Russia’s conventional military capabilities relative to other great powers had declined precipitously prior to the Georgia emergency in August 2008. Although the USSR made some progress on missile defenses and deployed several systems during the Cold War, Russia appears to rely primarily on nuclear deterrent through punishment to maintain the security of its territory. Micro threats that could not be stopped with nuclear deterrence—primarily terrorism based in the Caucasus—were countered by “micro capabilities”—antiterrorist and special troops. A new set of perceived threats, including the growing instability of the post-Soviet space, made Russia refocus from nuclear deterrence and counterterrorism to developing its ability to perform complex tactical operations. In recent years, Russia has been enhancing its conventional military capability; it executed a successful peace-enforcement operation against the Republic of Georgia and demonstrated deployment and C3 (command and control of nuclear forces) capabilities during the Ukrainian crisis of spring 2014. It also has some impressive conventional defensive capabilities, particularly in air defense. But with a long border, an incomplete transition of the ground forces to a more professional army, and decades of depressed military spending, Russia arguably would not be able to defend its territory using conventional means alone.

The United States and, eventually, Russia reasonably wish to defend against the potential threat of a limited, primitive ballistic missile strike. Given the increased capacities of countries with which relations are hostile, the possibility of “loose use” of nuclear weapons, and accidents, rogue commanders, terrorist acts, etc., missile defense is a desirable response to the risk of a limited missile strike. Both countries may also reasonably be concerned about cases in which the threat of nuclear punishment might fail to deter and missile defenses and conventional capabilities be required for effective defense. For this reason, the United States is likely to continue expanding its defensive capabilities in all spheres, including missile defense. Russia also is on the way to renovating its own national missile defense system, making it more flexible and mobile compared with the one adopted from the USSR. Still, neither country will be able to break effective strategic parity in offensive nuclear capabilities in the near future.

In sum, since the collapse of the USSR, the range of security threats perceived by the United States has expanded and the U.S. security portfolio has diversified to include enhanced conventional capability and missile defense while maintaining offensive nuclear capabilities. Russia, in contrast, has faced a new set of threats to its homeland but has simplified its security portfolio to a nearly singular reliance on the use of its offensive nuclear capabilities as a deterrent. This was determined by two fundamental factors: lack of resources to develop other capabilities and lack of strategic vision to understand clearly the need for a diverse security portfolio to deal properly with the new challenges of the international environment. In fact, this was, if not the only, then the clearest option, given reduced military spending and the need to secure the largest state territory in the world.

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A new set of perceived threats, including the growing instability of the post-Soviet space, made Russia refocus from nuclear deterrence and counterterrorism to developing its ability to perform complex tactical operations.

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5The United States has never embraced the idea of using nuclear weapons to strike populations and even during the Cold War sought multiple alternatives (flexible response) so that it would never be placed in a position where it had to do so.
Part Three: Possible sources of security

These asymmetries in the security portfolios of the United States and Russia have a significant impact on the prospects for nuclear arms control and on the strategic relationship between the two countries. As an agenda for U.S.-Russia relations, we offer the following recommendations:

Limit nuclear arsenals to a robust offensive capability.

The early Cold War relationship between the United States and Russia was markedly hostile, and the plausibility of a massive surprise attack stemmed from the nature of that relationship and the technology of that time. Neither the relationship nor the technology suggests that a massive surprise counterforce attack should be considered a plausible basis for policy planning. Such a strike, if not impossible, is certainly implausible in the current environment. There is no issue under dispute between the United States and Russia that either power would consider to warrant the outright destruction of the other or the risk of a significant percentage of their own population. Nor are any such existential issues on the horizon, and efforts to preserve a second-strike capacity to minimize the effectiveness of surprise attack are no longer necessary or stabilizing. Indeed, this is a costly response to a threat that no longer exists in the U.S.-Russia relationship and is unlikely to appear in relations with other rising powers. A secure offensive capability based on a much more limited (and sophisticated) nuclear arsenal is sufficient as a deterrent.¹⁶

Our reasoning here is bolstered both by Cold War experience and by the brute reality of current conditions. Even in much of the Cold War, a secure second strike was likely not essential for “crisis stability” or as a deterrent. Nuclear warfare was certainly avoided without it, and neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had a plausible second-strike capability until the 1960s. Even during the years when the enmity between the two countries was at its height, when the potential devastation of nuclear war was somewhat diminished by the lower capacity of the weapons and the Soviets may have legitimately feared that they would lose their entire nuclear arsenal in a surprise attack, they did not strike first. Although we know that a surprise counterforce strike was weighed as a serious possibility by both governments in the early years, the United States and the Soviet Union survived for over four Cold War decades without initiating such an attack or employing their nuclear forces in combat. Although we should be wise not to overinterpret the causes of this, it does appear that both sides were cautious and at least somewhat resistant to killing millions of enemy citizens and putting at risk their own for something less than a clear and deliberate threat to their sovereignty. The USSR largely maintained a “launch-on-warning”

¹⁶The nuclear force would also have to be sizable enough to continue to provide a deterrent against the arsenals of third parties (e.g., China).
system of deterrence throughout the Cold War, similar to the one that we advocate but with a much larger arsenal. Thus, departing from second-strike capability does not violate a stabilizing norm, as many currently suggest.17 The ability to launch a devastating first strike “on warning” was deterrent enough even when relations between the United States and the USSR were hostile and the intent of each side to annihilate the other was considered to be real.18 It is unlikely that a mutual secure second-strike capability ever was the primary reason that nuclear war was averted during the Cold War; it certainly does not provide “strategic stability” now.

The role of force structures in deterrence itself is arguably limited and should never be considered in isolation from the broader interests, risk aversion, or command and control of the powers in question. The deterrence literature developed in the 1970s and 1980s identified additional sources of stability or instability in addition to the structure of U.S. and Soviet forces. Following the Cuban missile crisis, there was considerable scholarly concern about the threat posed by the command and control of the nuclear forces and fears of rogue commanders, misperceptions, and accidental launches. This concern did not have a major impact on nuclear strategy or international agreements.19 More recent research has focused on risk propensity and information regarding the balance of resolve as a critical factor in determining under what conditions a state will be deterred.20 And finally, the effectiveness of and even the need for deterrence among nuclear powers depend in large part on the relationships between states. If relations are not openly hostile and vital interests are not at stake, then the incentive to use force against a nuclear power is minimal and the requirements for deterrence are dramatically reduced. In such cases, the nuclear threat is useful as insurance against future hostility but does not serve any necessary immediate function as a deterrent.

With contemporary launch-detection capabilities and even minimal transparency in the relationship between the United States and Russia, a limited offensive nuclear capability—sufficient to inflict unacceptable losses on multiple adversaries but not necessarily to do so after a surprise counterforce strike—is more than sufficient for stable deterrence in the U.S.-Russia relationship. Given the lower level of hostility between the two countries,

17 We know of no moment during the Cold War when the decision of either the United States or USSR to launch a counterforce strike was withheld after a warning of an impending attack because of a perceived ability by the other to strike back after withstanding an attack.

18 Indeed, although launch-on-warning deterrence is considered less stable, the greater risk of launch during periods of escalation may also serve to increase caution on both sides and prevent countries from escalating lower-level conflicts. The “strategic stability” in nuclear relations provided by a secure second strike can pose a moral hazard problem and encourage more confrontational interactions using non-nuclear forces. Launch-on-warning can, paradoxically, be more stabilizing. Whereas the Americans preferred parity even to their own supremacy if it could be stabilizing in their abstract models, the Soviets reportedly felt that stability could be achieved primarily through their own supremacy and continued to produce missiles long after they had achieved parity with the United States. There is no indication that the Soviet side believed that the capacity to destroy the enemy with a retaliatory strike had to be mutual to keep the situation stable. Rather, they believed that a “stable” environment was one in which the Soviet forces were dominant. See Yost, “Strategic Stability in the Cold War,” 18, 22.


20 As stated by Powell, “the more resolute a state is, the longer it is willing to hang on and the more risk it is willing to run before backing down” (“Nuclear Deterrence Theory”). The more it is willing to risk, the more likely it will fail to be deterred and there will be a nuclear exchange.
greater transparency and avenues of communication, and more sophisticated early warning systems, the possession of an offensive arsenal capable of executing a strike (rather than guaranteed to “survive” a strike) would provide a deterrent. In a sense, this is akin to the “launch-on-warning” system employed by the USSR during the Cold War, but in a more stable context in which existential threat is minimal. There would be considerable time before relations deteriorated to the point where accidental warnings or poor communication would be sufficient to provoke an offensive strike, and the risk of resort to nuclear weapons might even defuse tensions in the manner suggested by current Russian military doctrine. Each side’s offensive nuclear capacity would continue to have a stabilizing effect on U.S.-Russia relations and on relations with third parties, but reliance on the ability to execute a series of effective nuclear strikes rather than on possessing a “survivable” nuclear force that could still be launched after a massive counterforce attack (armageddon) would require a far more limited number of weapons and delivery systems than is currently in place. The costly “triad” could be abandoned.

In sum, strategy focused on preventing or surviving a surprise nuclear counterforce strike is no longer a useful basis for policy, but limited offensive nuclear capability as a deterrent is a potential stabilizer that should be preserved.

**Missile defenses, even if developed unilaterally, need not be destabilizing.**

When it comes to the issue of missile defenses, a more secure United States does not make for a less secure Russia under current conditions. Insofar as Russia relies solely on deterrence through an assured ability to “punish” those who threaten its security with an effective nuclear missile strike, and ABM systems could reduce the effectiveness of that strike, the U.S. ABM systems might be seen to diminish Russian security. This raises a fundamental Russian concern: to the extent that U.S. missile defenses are effective against Russia’s current offensive nuclear capability and the United States seems willing to launch a disarming first strike, the development of U.S. missile defenses would undermine Russian security. But neither condition is likely to obtain.

Given current delivery technology and the size of Russia’s missile forces, Russia’s offensive nuclear capability is robust against all foreseeable missile defense systems. The United States would be incapable of defending its territory against a Russian nuclear strike. With relatively inexpensive modifications and penetration aids, the Russian arsenal will continue to be effective against U.S. missile defenses for the imaginable future. With shrinking nuclear arsenals and increased capacities of ABM systems, Russia may at some point lose its nuclear deterrent. It is therefore concerned about the implications of any reduction in its nuclear forces in light of future development of ABM systems; any security arrangement must optimize the size and sophistication of the Russian nuclear force so that its ability to execute a punishing offensive strike is preserved. This would certainly be a smaller force than currently exists, but likely larger than the one required by the United States as a deterrent against Russia, given that Russia currently does not deploy sophisticated missile defenses. Put simply, Russia may need a slightly larger and/or more sophisticated arsenal.
than it would if the United States did not have any missile defenses, and therefore it may need a slightly larger arsenal than sustained by the United States. This is precisely what we mean by compatibility rather than symmetry of force structures: increased U.S. need for missile defense can be made compatible with Russia’s need to preserve a nuclear deterrent, but the force structures of the two countries may increasingly diverge and no longer preserve parity in the number of warheads within a given category.

Strategic compatibility, not parity, will provide security.

For the reasons outlined above, negotiated treaties to secure symmetrical bilateral reductions in nuclear arms—a staple of traditional arms control—no longer appear to be a viable path to security. Symmetrical reductions of nuclear forces by the United States and Russia no longer have symmetrical effects on the two countries’ security. While modest reductions in offensive nuclear arms would likely have no effect on the Russian deterrent, more substantial reductions would likely increase insecurity in Russia considerably more than in the United States. In the extreme case, the removal of nuclear weapons would leave the United States in a situation of low vulnerability to military threat, but would leave Russia in a position of extreme vulnerability. This would be true even if the United States were not considered a threat to Russia.

In the contemporary environment, enhanced security is attainable in the short term if the United States and Russia develop different but compatible security portfolios, with the United States enhancing defense (both conventional and ballistic missile defenses) and Russia primarily focused on maintaining a robust offensive nuclear capability as a deterrent. This would effectively provide security for both countries through defense or deterrence against third parties and against each other.

In many ways, this is simply an acknowledgment of trends already in place. The United States will continue to build defensive capability, constructing a missile defense system with its allies and partners that would be effective against most small-to-medium-sized nuclear arsenals. A more robust defense would allow the United States to make unilateral and substantial reductions in its offensive nuclear arsenal. This effort along with enhanced defensive capability would not have a destabilizing effect on relations with major powers, including Russia. The U.S. security portfolio would favor a balance of defensive and offensive capabilities.

Russia could continue to focus military research on maintaining its offensive nuclear strike capability as a deterrent against China, the United States, and other potential threats. Russia would preserve the capacity to penetrate U.S. defenses, and perhaps be assured of that through an agreement on transparency that would allow the Russian side enough technical knowledge of U.S. systems to feel confident that it could penetrate any defensive shield in operation. Russia would maintain an offensive nuclear arsenal of the minimal size and structure required for deterrence, and its security would be maintained by preserving the capacity for a devastating nuclear strike against all potential enemy states.
No official collaboration or alliance is required between Russia and the United States to achieve these ends. As noted previously, the two countries share a goal of maintaining a peaceful China within its current boundaries, and the deterrent that each independently provides serves both countries well. A formal alliance would likely only unnecessarily heighten tensions with the Chinese. Deterring Chinese territorial ambitions would be a natural outgrowth of U.S. and Russian nuclear strategies without coordination. Stability based on understood interests and capabilities could be achieved even in the absence of trust.

**Transparency enhances security.**

The Cold War is not entirely without useful lessons. Each of the proposals outlined above would be made more effective if buttressed by institutions that preserve and enhance reassurance and transparency in U.S.-Russia relations. Security is provided by the substantial capabilities of the two countries. Secrecy, in this environment, is a detriment to security and simply widens the informational gaps that increase the likelihood of war.

A clear awareness of each country’s capabilities and how they are being deployed, and early warning of their use will enhance the security of both nations. Complete information regarding each country’s ABM capabilities would provide confidence in the offensive capability required to maintain deterrence and allow both sides to optimize the number and type of weapons in their arsenals to sustain it. Constant surveillance of launch sites (through closed-circuit television) would provide the earliest possible indication of preparations for launch and bolster the stability of the launch-on-warning system and the more limited number of warheads required to maintain its effectiveness.

Much like in the later years of the Cold War, such security arrangements need not be based on mutual trust or warm relations. They are in the strategic interests of both sides.
Conclusions

Both the United States and Russia are currently faced with hard choices about their security and the structure of their nuclear arsenals. Nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, like all machines, have a limited lifespan, and the American and Russian arsenals are approaching their ends. The two countries are no longer faced with a decision whether to dismantle the large Cold War arsenals designed for counterforce strikes and secure second-strike capabilities. Each country must now decide whether those nuclear forces are important enough to build anew.

In the reconstruction of our nuclear forces today, there is no strategic need to reconstruct or preserve the “triad”21 and the large nuclear resources believed to be required for strategic stability during the Cold War. Conditions have clearly changed. Past notions of stability must be reconsidered in a new setting, and the policies that stemmed from Cold War conditions need to be reevaluated. We suggest three basic changes to nuclear doctrine:

In the Cold War, the sole existential threats to the United States and the USSR came from each other, and the possibility that either side would take the opportunity to destroy their enemy with an offensive nuclear strike was considered a realistic basis for planning. Many of the Cold War security arrangements, still present in today’s relations and forces, were designed to guarantee that both countries could withstand an initial nuclear counterforce strike and subsequently deliver a punishing nuclear response. Some U.S. strategists believed that the “survivability” of nuclear forces was necessary to achieve “strategic stability” and to reduce the need to resort to a pre-emptive nuclear response in a crisis. If a punishing response could be delivered following a counterforce strike, then there would be no incentive to rush to launch. Anti-ballistic missile systems were thought to be destabilizing not because they could create an impenetrable shield against initial attack, but because they could limit the effectiveness of a second strike. The diminished second strike would make crises less stable, since it would create incentives to strike first.

The focus on the preservation of secure second-strike capability as essential to stability between nuclear states is a strategy designed for a world that no longer exists—and perhaps never did. U.S.-Russia relations are not warm in the contemporary period, but neither country is intent on destroying the other if given an opportunity. A Russian surprise nuclear first strike designed to destroy U.S. fighting capacity before the United States could respond is no longer plausible. Similarly, Russia presumably considers a surprise U.S. nuclear

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21 A three-branched nuclear capability consisting of intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers.
counterforce strike to be an extremely remote possibility. Therefore, the expensive force structure designed to deal with this threat by preserving the capacity for second strike is obsolete.22 At best, it is a luxury that neither the United States nor Russia can currently afford.

This is not a call for the elimination of nuclear weapons from both countries’ arsenals. Even if no mutual enmity and threat exists between Russia and the United States, the removal of nuclear weapons in the short term would be very destabilizing for the bilateral relationship, leaving the United States in a position of great superiority and Russia in a position of extreme vulnerability. It would leave both countries vulnerable to China and other countries that either have already acquired or are likely to acquire nuclear capability. Neither the United States nor Russia can afford to abandon its nuclear arsenal in the short term.

Rather, the security of both countries is effectively preserved if the United States has the capacity to defend against third parties and maintains a small but effective offensive nuclear arsenal as a deterrent, while Russia maintains deterrence with a large, sophisticated offensive nuclear arsenal able to penetrate any missile defenses. This would allow stable and secure relations between the two nations without parity in their nuclear or conventional forces. It would mark the end of decades of arms control focused on achieving parity and symmetry in U.S. and Russian forces, while preserving a certain compatibility and likely enhancing security for both parties.

Current conditions are not as hostile as those during the Cold War, but levels of trust are simply not high enough to sustain a stronger and more institutionalized relationship between the two countries such as exists between the United States and its European allies, although this is likely to the considerable detriment of both sides’ security. The establishment of a more trusting relationship should nonetheless remain a long-term goal, and we should make provisions for achieving it.

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22 And if we believe that inadvertent launch is a risk, then larger and more diversified nuclear arsenals increase that risk.
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