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Two Rounds of the Strategic Stability Dialogue: An Analysis

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On June 16, 2021, after the meeting of Presidents Biden and Putin, United States and Russia released a joint statement in which they announced an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue that will be “deliberate and robust” to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures, including that of threat of nuclear war.¹ Thereafter, on July 28, the first round of strategic stability dialogue took place in Geneva. In this meeting, the U.S. delegation focused on “current security environment, national perceptions of threats, prospects for new arms control and format for future Strategic Stability Dialogue sessions”. The discussion in Geneva was termed as “professional and substantive”.² Subsequently on September 30, the second round of US-Russia bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue has now been held in Geneva, Switzerland. This discussion has been described as “intensive and substantive”. In this meeting, both sides have agreed to form “two interagency expert working groups” one on “Principles and Objectives for Future Arms Control” and the second one on “Capabilities and Actions with Strategic Effects”.³

Although there are points of convergences to capitalize on, these talks also have to bridge large asymmetric interests. U.S. has concerns about new developments of Russia’s nonstrategic nuclear weapons and new nuclear delivery systems. Russia envisions a new security equation and is focussing on U.S. ballistic missile defenses and all nuclear and nonnuclear, offensive, and defensive weapons of the United States that affect strategic stability.⁴ Russia also wants to bring France and United Kingdom into arms control negotiations.⁵ US wants to include China into arms control talks. China has largely declined the proposals to join trilateral talks on nuclear arms control. A letter dated 25 August 2021, issued by China’s Embassy in London, reiterated that China is against hype of trilateral arms control negotiations. Also given huge gap in nuclear arsenals of China with US and Russia, it is “impractical to ask China to join” and “China will not participate in such negotiation and will never accept any coercion or blackmail”.⁶ Meanwhile, Russia itself has officially signed off from the 1992 Open Skies Treaty recently and will completely withdraw by December 2021.⁷

The Concept of Strategic Stability

In 1990, the “absence of incentives for any country to launch a first nuclear strike” was termed as strategic stability. As the inability to achieve any advantage renders a first nuclear strike irrational for both sides and that irrationality makes the logic of nuclear war also irrational. Though this concept has not become totally insignificant but today in an increasingly changing security scenarios various long-standing notions and policies need to be “overhauled and adjusted accordingly”.⁸ The aged Cold War stability paradigm and its “mirror-imaging presumption are disconnected from current realities”.⁹ Thomas Schelling also reiterated in 2013 that we are now in a different world, a “world so much more complex... so much more complicated, so multivariate, so unpredictable, involving so many nations and cultures and languages in nuclear

relationships” and many of them are asymmetric which makes it difficult to comprehend meanings of strategic stability.¹⁰

Presently there are ensuing debates on the new understanding of the very concept of strategic stability itself. As the global power equations have changed enormously, it is speculated that new parameters must be defined. These parameters should include “new and modernized strategic weapons including missile-defence, space and cyber-warfare capabilities, to the extent that these affect strategic stability”.¹¹ Also, some nontraditional nuclear weapons such as hypersonic weapons, long-range cruise missiles, intercontinental torpedoes and tactical nukes present new problems. Along with that the global competition among United States, China and Russia and regional rivalries of other nations such as Pakistan, North Korea should be taken into consideration. The issue of deployment and doctrines, communications and confidence-building measures and other conflict-prevention mechanisms should also be included.¹²

Also, the gradual withdrawal of nations from treaties is not a good sign for arms control reduction measures. In 2002, US withdrew from Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty which was considered as “cornerstone of strategic stability” for nearly thirty years. In 2019, the US and Russia withdrew from Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. Similar is the fate of Open Skies Treaty. Also, the number of nuclear warheads in China is a growing concern. As the only remaining arms control treaty, the New START will end in 2026 unless its successful replacement is found. The focus on new set of delivery vehicles and issues related to nuclear doctrines, linkages between offense and defence with the new nuclear weapon system are generally not covered by earlier treaties.¹³ Moreover, the addition of new weapons systems and warheads will also need more changes in inspections and procedures.

Therefore, the Strategic Stability Dialogue is a fresh step in this regard. The rounds will offer an opportunity to both sides to explore the new range of contemporary strategic security concerns and negotiate on them. They will also help in building confidence and trust that can help achieve peace through dialogues. Upcoming rounds of these dialogues are awaited with the hope that they will fruitfully disentangle the web of emerging strategic concerns.

Notes

¹ The White House, *U.S.-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability*, Press Release June 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/>, accessed on September 25, 2021.

² U.S. Department of State, *Deputy Secretary Sherman's Participation in Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov*, Press Release, July 28, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/deputy-secretary-shermans-participation-in-strategic-stability-dialogue-with-russian-deputy-foreign-minister-sergey-ryabkov/>

³ U.S. Department of State, *Joint Statement on the Outcomes of the U.S. – Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue in Geneva on September 30*, Media Note, September 30, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-outcomes-of-the-u-s-russia-strategic-stability-dialogue-in-geneva-on-september-30/> accessed on September 26, 2021.

⁴ Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, "U.S., Russia Expected to Continue Stability Talks," *Arms Control Today* September 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-09/news/us-russia-expected-continue-stability-talks> , accessed on September 28, 2021.

⁵ Reuters, "Russia touts Britain, France for wider nuclear talks" July 29, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/russia-says-us-wants-china-included-arms-control-talks-ifax-2021-07-29/> accessed on September 30, 2021.

⁶ Financial Times, "Letter: China rejects calls to join nuclear disarmament talks", <https://www.ft.com/content/634220f9-0d34-4e85-9290-698b333852e2> , accessed on September 30, 2021.

⁷ Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, "Members Discuss Open Skies Treaty After Russia Withdraws", *Arms Control Association*, September 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-09/news/members-discuss-open-skies-treaty-after-russia-withdraws> , accessed on September 28, 2021.

⁸ Dmitri Trenin, "Strategic Stability in the Changing World" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/3-15_Trenin_StrategicStability.pdf, accessed on September 30, 2021.

⁹ Keith B Payne and Michaela Dodge, "The Strategic Stability Dialogue: Think Before You Speak" July 09, 2021, RealClear Defense, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/07/08/the_strategic_stability_dialogue_think_before_you_speak_784794.html, accessed on September 30, 2021.

¹⁰ Thomas Schelling, "Foreword," in, Colby and Gerson, eds., *Strategic Stability: Contending Interpretations*, 2013 op. cit., pp. vii-viii, <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2216.pdf>, accessed on September 30, 2021

¹¹ William Alberque and Chelsey Wiley, "Russia, the US and the post-New START agenda", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, August 6, 2021 <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/08/russia-us-post-new-start-agenda>, accessed on October 01, 2021.

¹² Dmitri Trenin, "Strategic Stability in the Changing World" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/3-15_Trenin_StrategicStability.pdf, accessed on September 30, 2021.

¹³ William Alberque and Chelsey Wiley, "Russia, the US and the post-New START agenda", *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, August 6, 2021 <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/08/russia-us-post-new-start-agenda>, accessed on October 01, 2021.