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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**UKRAINE AND A NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE:  
A REVISIT OF THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY ..... 3**  
*Dmytro Byliev*

**AMERICAN DECOUPLING FROM EUROPE: THE NEW APPROACHES  
TO WASHINGTON'S (QUASI) LEADERSHIP ..... 11**  
*Oleksandr Kraiev*

**THE UKRAINE EFFECT: SECURITY GUARANTEES AND THE RISE  
OF MINILATERALISM IN EUROPE'S NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE ..... 18**  
*Elnur Ismayil*

**"THE DONROE DOCTRINE": TRANSFORMATION OF THE US SECURITY POLICY  
TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA DURING DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM..... 31**  
*Ivan Fechko*

**STRATEGIC STABILITY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLAR NUCLEAR COMPETITION..... 43**  
*Alina Hrytsenko*

**BELARUS'S SUCCESSION PROBLEM AS THE MISSING LINK IN EUROPE'S  
POST-WAR SECURITY ARCHITECTURE ..... 56**  
*Pavlo Rad*

# STRATEGIC STABILITY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLAR NUCLEAR COMPETITION

*Dr Alina Hrytsenko*

*The article examines the transformation of strategic stability in an increasingly multipolar nuclear order. It analyses how the transition from bipolarity has altered traditional concepts of deterrence and strategic stability, and assesses the limitations of Cold War-era theoretical frameworks in explaining contemporary nuclear competition. Particular attention is devoted to the roles of Russia, China, and North Korea in reshaping the global nuclear landscape, as well as the strategic risks arising from growing complexity, technological change, and the erosion of arms control institutions. The article also explores potential mechanisms for preserving strategic stability through nuclear risk reduction, crisis management, strategic dialogue, and more flexible approaches to nuclear governance.*

## Introduction

The international nuclear order is undergoing its most profound transformation since the end of the Cold War. For more than five decades, strategic stability was largely understood through the prism of bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The underlying assumptions of this framework rested on relatively stable nuclear parity, mutual vulnerability, predictable patterns of deterrence, and institutionalised arms control mechanisms that sought to reduce the risks of nuclear escalation. Although crises and periods of heightened confrontation repeatedly challenged the system, the bipolar structure provided a degree of strategic predictability that shaped both nuclear doctrine and international security policy.

The contemporary security environment differs fundamentally from that of the Cold War. The gradual collapse of the

bilateral arms control architecture, the modernisation and expansion of nuclear arsenals, the emergence of new technologies that affect strategic deterrence, and the growing role of regional nuclear powers have all contributed to a significantly more complex strategic landscape. Rather than a predominantly bilateral relationship, nuclear competition increasingly involves multiple actors with divergent capabilities, doctrines, threat perceptions, and political objectives. As a result, the traditional concept of strategic stability faces mounting theoretical and practical challenges.

Among the developments driving this transformation are China's rapid nuclear expansion, Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear coercion as an instrument of statecraft, and North Korea's continued advancement of its nuclear and missile capabilities. These trends unfold against a broader backdrop of deteriorating relations among the major powers, growing geopolitical fragmentation, and declining

confidence in existing arms control and confidence-building mechanisms. At the same time, technological developments — including advances in missile defence, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, and space-based systems — are further complicating deterrence dynamics, by increasing uncertainty, compressing decision time, and blurring the distinction between conventional and nuclear conflicts.



***Among the developments driving this transformation are China's rapid nuclear expansion, Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear coercion as an instrument of statecraft, and North Korea's continued advancement of its nuclear and missile capabilities***

These changes raise fundamental questions regarding the continued relevance of classical theories of strategic stability. Concepts developed to explain deterrence in a bipolar system may no longer adequately account for interactions among multiple nuclear-armed states, whose strategic relationships are neither symmetric nor equally interdependent. The growing number of nuclear dyads, overlapping regional deterrence relationships, and the absence of comprehensive multilateral arms control arrangements create new pathways for miscalculation, inadvertent escalation, and crisis instability.

These developments call for a reassessment of strategic stability as both an analytical concept and a practical objective of international security policy. Frameworks developed for bipolar nuclear competition are becoming increasingly insufficient for

explaining deterrence dynamics, in a system characterised by multiple nuclear actors, asymmetrical strategic relationships, and overlapping regional security complexes. At the same time, the weakening of arms control institutions and the growing role of emerging technologies further increase the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

Understanding strategic stability under these conditions requires moving beyond the assumptions that shaped Cold War deterrence theory. Greater attention must be paid to the interaction of multiple nuclear powers with divergent strategic cultures, capabilities, and security interests, as well as to the institutional mechanisms capable of reducing nuclear risks in the absence of comprehensive arms control agreements. The evolving roles of Russia, China, and North Korea illustrate many of these challenges and highlight the need to reconsider the foundations of deterrence, crisis stability, and nuclear diplomacy in an increasingly multipolar international system.

### **From Bipolar to Multipolar Strategic Stability**

The concept of strategic stability was developed within the context of the Cold War, when international security was dominated by strategic interaction between the two superpowers. Although no universally accepted definition exists, strategic stability has generally been understood as a condition in which neither side has an incentive to initiate either a conventional or a nuclear first strike during a crisis. Mutual vulnerability, approximate strategic parity, and credible second-strike capabilities formed the foundations of this equilibrium<sup>1</sup>. Over time, bilateral arms control agreements, transparency

1 R. Jervis, *The meaning of the nuclear revolution: Statecraft and the prospect of Armageddon*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989

measures, and crisis communication mechanisms reinforced this stability by reducing uncertainty and limiting the risks of miscalculation.

The gradual transition towards a multipolar nuclear order fundamentally alters these assumptions. Rather than two principal actors managing a relatively stable strategic relationship, contemporary deterrence increasingly involves several nuclear powers with different military capabilities, strategic objectives, regional interests, and perceptions of acceptable risk<sup>2</sup>. The emergence of additional states with nuclear capabilities transforms deterrence from a largely bilateral interaction into a network of interconnected strategic relationships, in which decisions taken by one actor inevitably influence the security calculations of several others.

This transformation significantly complicates the maintenance of strategic stability. Under bipolarity, deterrence depended primarily on maintaining a predictable balance between two adversaries. In a multipolar system, stability can no longer be assessed solely through the bilateral balance between any two nuclear powers. Strategic calculations increasingly involve triangular and multilateral interactions, in which shifts in one strategic relationship affect the stability of others. Efforts by one state to strengthen deterrence against a particular adversary may simultaneously undermine deterrence elsewhere, creating security dilemmas across multiple theatres.

The increasing asymmetry among nuclear powers further distinguishes the contemporary environment from the Cold War model. Nuclear-armed states possess

significantly different arsenal sizes, force structures, technological capabilities, and nuclear doctrines. While some maintain diversified strategic triads and sophisticated early-warning systems, others rely on comparatively limited arsenals designed primarily for minimum deterrence or regional defence<sup>3</sup>. These asymmetries make it considerably more difficult to establish common understandings of strategic stability, or to negotiate arms control arrangements based on reciprocal limitations.



***The emergence of additional states with nuclear capabilities transforms deterrence from a largely bilateral interaction into a network of interconnected strategic relationships***

Multipolarity also increases the probability of strategic miscalculation. The growing number of nuclear actors creates multiple overlapping deterrence relationships, each influenced by distinct historical experiences, political objectives, alliance commitments, and regional security dynamics. During periods of crisis, decision-makers must assess not only the likely behaviour of a single adversary but also the potential reactions of several nuclear powers, whose interests may only partially coincide. As a result, uncertainty becomes an increasingly significant factor shaping strategic decision-making.

Consequently, strategic stability can no longer be understood simply as the preservation of mutual vulnerability

2 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025 [<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full>]

3 V. Narang, Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2014

between two superpowers<sup>4</sup>. In a multipolar nuclear environment, stability depends more and more on managing a broader set of strategic interactions, limiting escalation across interconnected regional and global theatres, and reducing the risks arising from uncertainty, technological change, and the absence of comprehensive multilateral arms control mechanisms.

### **Nuclear Risk Reduction beyond Traditional Arms Control**

The deterioration of the global arms control architecture does not eliminate the need for nuclear risk reduction. Instead, it changes both its purpose and the instruments through which it can be achieved. During the Cold War, strategic stability was supported by legally binding bilateral agreements that limited strategic capabilities, enhanced transparency, and established procedures for crisis management<sup>5</sup>. In the contemporary security environment, however, the political conditions necessary for negotiating similarly comprehensive agreements are largely absent. Nuclear risk reduction must therefore increasingly rely on alternative mechanisms that seek to manage rather than eliminate strategic competition.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in the understanding of arms control itself. Whereas traditional arms control focused primarily on limiting the number and characteristics of nuclear weapons, contemporary approaches place greater emphasis on reducing the probability of miscalculation, accidental escalation, and unintended conflict<sup>6</sup>. Risk reduction is therefore becoming a complementary

objective rather than a direct substitute for formal arms limitation. The central challenge is no longer maintaining numerical parity between two superpowers, but preserving sufficient predictability and communication in an increasingly fragmented strategic environment.



***Nuclear risk reduction must therefore increasingly rely on alternative mechanisms that seek to manage rather than eliminate strategic competition***

Several mechanisms remain capable of contributing to nuclear risk reduction, even in the absence of comprehensive treaties. These include strategic dialogue, military-to-military communication channels, crisis hotlines, advance notification of missile launches and large-scale military exercises, transparency measures regarding nuclear doctrine, and confidence-building arrangements designed to reduce ambiguity during periods of heightened tension<sup>7</sup>. While none of these measures directly limits nuclear arsenals, each can reduce the likelihood that misunderstandings or misperceptions escalate into military confrontation.

At the same time, the effectiveness of such mechanisms depends on broader political conditions. Risk reduction cannot be entirely separated from the level of trust among nuclear-armed states, nor can technical arrangements fully compensate for deteriorating strategic relations. Nevertheless, even adversarial

4 J. M. Acton, *Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2021

5 R. Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989

6 J.M. Acton, *Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2021

7 B. Tertrais, *The war that must never be fought: Dilemmas of nuclear deterrence*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

relationships may generate a shared interest in preventing uncontrolled escalation, thus creating opportunities for limited forms of cooperation despite persistent geopolitical competition.

Future efforts to preserve strategic stability are therefore likely to rely on a layered approach combining bilateral, regional, and multilateral initiatives, rather than a single comprehensive arms control regime. Instead of seeking immediate replacements for Cold War-era treaties, international efforts are increasingly expected to focus on pragmatic measures that enhance transparency, improve crisis communication, and strengthen mechanisms for managing escalation<sup>8</sup>. Such arrangements are unlikely to eliminate strategic rivalry, but they can reduce its most dangerous possible consequences and contribute to a more predictable nuclear environment.

### The Limits of Cold War Deterrence Models

Classical theories of nuclear deterrence and strategic stability were developed under conditions that differ fundamentally from today's international security environment. Although many of their core principles — including second-strike capability, mutual vulnerability, and the credibility of deterrence — remain relevant<sup>9</sup>, the assumptions on which they were originally based have become increasingly difficult to sustain. The transition towards a more complex and technologically dynamic security environment has exposed important limitations in Cold War models of strategic stability.

One of the central assumptions of Cold War deterrence was the existence of a relatively stable bipolar balance. Strategic calculations were primarily shaped by the interaction of two superpowers<sup>10</sup> with broadly comparable capabilities and a shared understanding of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war. Contemporary deterrence, by contrast, operates within a system characterised by multiple nuclear actors, diverse strategic objectives, and varying perceptions of acceptable risk. Stability can no longer be understood solely as a bilateral relationship between two adversaries.



***Future efforts to preserve strategic stability are therefore likely to rely on a layered approach combining bilateral, regional, and multilateral initiatives***

A second assumption concerned the predictability of strategic behaviour. During much of the Cold War era, deterrence theory assumed that nuclear powers would behave as rational actors, seeking to avoid escalation towards nuclear conflict. While rational decision-making remains an important analytical concept<sup>11</sup>, contemporary crises are increasingly influenced by domestic political considerations, regional conflicts, asymmetric capabilities, information uncertainty, and divergent strategic cultures. These factors complicate traditional models of escalation management, and make adversaries' behaviour more difficult to anticipate.

8 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025 [https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full]

9 L. Freedman, *The evolution of nuclear strategy* (4th ed.), Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2019

10 E.A. Colby, M.S. Gerson, (Eds.), *Strategic stability: Contending interpretations*. U.S. Army War College Press: Carlisle, 2013

11 D. Adamsky, *The Russian way of deterrence: Strategic culture, coercion, and war*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2023

Technological developments have further weakened several assumptions underpinning Cold War deterrence. Advances in precision-guided conventional weapons, missile defence systems, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, and space-based military assets increasingly blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear operations<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, they reduce decision-making time, increase uncertainty regarding the survivability of strategic forces, and complicate assessments of escalation risks. As a result, strategic stability can no longer be analysed exclusively through the prism of the balance of nuclear arsenals.



***Technological developments  
have further weakened several  
assumptions underpinning  
Cold War deterrence***

Cold War deterrence also relied heavily on institutional mechanisms that promoted transparency, communication, and predictability. Arms control agreements, verification regimes, and regular strategic dialogue helped reduce uncertainty<sup>13</sup> and establish shared expectations regarding strategic behaviour. The gradual erosion of these institutions has increased the likelihood that crises will unfold without many of the safeguards that previously contributed to strategic stability.

These developments do not render classical deterrence theory obsolete. Many of its fundamental insights remain central to an understanding of nuclear strategy.

However, the analytical framework requires significant adaptation, to account for multipolar strategic interaction, emerging technologies, regional deterrence dynamics, and the declining role of formal arms control mechanisms. Strategic stability in the twenty-first century can no longer be explained solely through concepts developed for bipolar nuclear competition, but must instead reflect the greater complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness of the contemporary international security environment.

**Russia, China and North Korea as  
Drivers of the Emerging Nuclear  
Order**

The transformation of the contemporary nuclear order cannot be explained solely by the diffusion of nuclear capabilities or the emergence of additional nuclear-armed states. More fundamentally, it reflects changes in how nuclear weapons are perceived, integrated into national security strategies, and employed as instruments of international politics. In this process, Russia, China and North Korea occupy distinct but complementary positions. Each challenges different assumptions that underpinned the post-Cold War strategic environment<sup>14</sup>, while collectively accelerating the transition towards a more fragmented and competitive nuclear order.

Russia remains the principal military successor to the Soviet Union, and continues to possess one of the world's two largest nuclear arsenals. Unlike in the later stages of the Cold War, however, Russian nuclear strategy has increasingly blurred the distinction between deterrence

12 J. M. Acton, *Escalation through entanglement: How the vulnerability of command-and-control systems raises the risks of an inadvertent nuclear war*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2018

13 T. D. Grant, *Nuclear Arms Control in Peril: Why the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Matters and How to Save it*, Policy Press: Bristol, 2024.

14 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025  
[<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full>]

and coercion<sup>15</sup>. Nuclear weapons have become integrated into conventional military campaigns, diplomatic signalling, and broader efforts to shape adversaries' political calculations. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022<sup>16</sup>, repeated nuclear threats, changes in nuclear doctrine, deployments of tactical nuclear weapons beyond Russian territory, and public nuclear messaging have demonstrated an increasing willingness to use nuclear threats not only to prevent attacks on Russia itself but also to constrain Western military and political support for Ukraine.



***China's modernisation has consequences extending well beyond numerical growth. It fundamentally alters the architecture of global deterrence***

This evolution carries broader implications for the international nuclear order. Classical deterrence theory largely assumed that nuclear weapons existed primarily to prevent war through mutual vulnerability. Russia's behaviour illustrates a different model, in which nuclear capabilities are used to create political space for conventional military operations<sup>17</sup>, while seeking to deter external intervention. Such an approach lowers the threshold for nuclear signalling, increases ambiguity regarding escalation, and weakens long-standing informal norms governing

responsible nuclear behaviour. The result is not merely greater instability in Europe, but a broader erosion of the normative foundations upon which strategic stability has traditionally rested.

China represents a different source of systemic transformation. For decades, Beijing maintained a comparatively restrained nuclear posture, based on a relatively small arsenal, minimum deterrence, and an officially declared no-first-use policy. This posture is now undergoing significant revision. The rapid expansion of China's nuclear forces, large-scale construction of missile silo fields, improvements in ballistic missile submarine capabilities, development of hypersonic delivery systems, and modernisation of strategic command-and-control infrastructure, indicate that China is preparing to develop a substantially larger and more sophisticated deterrent<sup>18</sup>.

China's modernisation has consequences extending well beyond numerical growth. It fundamentally alters the architecture of global deterrence, by replacing the relatively stable bilateral balance between Washington and Moscow with a triangular strategic relationship. Unlike bipolar deterrence, triangular deterrence lacks established rules, mature communication mechanisms, and institutionalised arms control arrangements. Strategic calculations increasingly involve interactions among three major nuclear powers whose security interests only partially overlap. Decisions taken within one bilateral relationship inevitably affect

15 D. Adamsky, *The Russian way of deterrence: Strategic culture, coercion, and war*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2023

16 A.L. Fink, *Russia's Nuclear and Coercive Signaling During the War in Ukraine* (CRS Insight No. IN12464). Congressional Research Service: Washington, D.C., 2024 [<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12464>]

17 B. Tertrais, *The War that Must Never be Fought: Dilemmas of Nuclear Deterrence*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

18 F.S. Cunningham, *Under the Nuclear Shadow: China's Information-Age Weapons in International Security*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2025

the others, creating strategic externalities that did not exist under the Cold War model. This significantly complicates crisis management, and increases the difficulty of maintaining strategic stability across multiple theatres simultaneously.



***The significance of North Korea lies less in the absolute size of its arsenal than in its impact on regional deterrence. Its nuclear programme influences the defence planning of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and increasingly China and Russia***

North Korea constitutes a third and qualitatively different challenge. Although its nuclear arsenal remains significantly smaller than those of the major nuclear powers, Pyongyang has demonstrated that even a relatively limited nuclear capability can reshape regional security dynamics. Through sustained investment in ballistic missiles of varying ranges, solid-fuel technologies, manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles, submarine-launched systems, and tactical nuclear capabilities, North Korea has steadily improved the survivability and credibility of its deterrent<sup>19</sup>.

The significance of North Korea lies less in the absolute size of its arsenal than in its impact on regional deterrence. Its nuclear programme influences the defence planning of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and increasingly China and Russia. As alliance commitments, missile defence systems, conventional strike capabilities, and extended deterrence guarantees evolve in response, developments on the Korean Peninsula generate wider strategic

consequences that extend beyond Northeast Asia. North Korea, therefore, illustrates how regional nuclear competition can become embedded within the broader global strategic balance.

Taken together, Russia, China and North Korea represent three distinct pathways through which the contemporary nuclear order is being transformed. Russia challenges the political norms governing nuclear deterrence by expanding the role of nuclear coercion. China reshapes the structural distribution of strategic power, through the emergence of a third major nuclear centre. North Korea demonstrates that relatively small nuclear powers can exercise disproportionate influence over regional and global deterrence dynamics. Their combined impact extends beyond changes in force structure or arsenal size. It reflects a broader transformation in the logic of deterrence itself, in which strategic stability increasingly depends on managing interconnected relationships among multiple nuclear actors operating across different regional and global theatres, rather than preserving a single balance between two superpowers.

### **Strategic Risks in a Multipolar Nuclear Environment**

The transition towards a multipolar nuclear order introduces a broader and more complex spectrum of strategic risks than those associated with the bipolar competition of the Cold War. Although the probability of deliberate large-scale nuclear war among the major powers remains relatively low, the likelihood of miscalculation, unintended escalation, and crisis instability has increased considerably. These risks stem not only from the growing number of nuclear-armed states but also from the interaction of diverse nuclear

19 E. Howell, *North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order: When Bad Behaviour Pays*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2023

doctrines, emerging technologies, regional conflicts, and the weakening of international arms control institutions<sup>20</sup>.

One of the most significant challenges is the increasing complexity of deterrence relationships. During the Cold War, strategic calculations were primarily based on a bilateral balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. In contrast, the contemporary nuclear environment consists of multiple overlapping deterrence relationships<sup>21</sup>, each shaped by different strategic interests, alliance commitments, military capabilities, and regional security dynamics. Decisions taken by one nuclear power may simultaneously influence several strategic relationships, creating indirect consequences that are difficult to predict or manage.

Closely related is the growing risk of strategic miscalculation. Multipolarity increases uncertainty by expanding both the number of actors involved in crises and the range of possible responses. Decision-makers must assess not only the intentions of a single adversary but also the potential reactions of allies, partners, and third parties, whose interests may only partially coincide. The absence of established multilateral crisis-management mechanisms further increases the possibility that misperceptions or incorrect assumptions could contribute to rapid escalation<sup>22</sup>.

Technological change constitutes another major source of instability. Advances in cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, precision conventional

strike systems, missile defence, counter-space capabilities, and autonomous military systems increasingly blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear operations<sup>23</sup>. These technologies may threaten early-warning systems, command-and-control infrastructure, or the survivability of strategic forces, thereby creating incentives for rapid decision-making during crises. As warning times decrease, opportunities for political leaders to assess information and prevent unintended escalation become correspondingly more limited.



***Multipolarity increases uncertainty by expanding both the number of actors involved in crises and the range of possible responses. Decision-makers must assess not only the intentions of a single adversary but also the potential reactions of allies, partners, and third parties***

A further challenge arises from the growing interaction between regional and global deterrence. Nuclear crises are no longer confined to isolated bilateral relationships, but increasingly develop within interconnected regional security complexes. Developments on the Korean Peninsula, in the Taiwan Strait, Eastern Europe, or South Asia have the potential to affect the strategic calculations of other nuclear powers, through alliance commitments, military

20 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025  
[<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full>]

21 B. Tertrais, The war that must never be fought: Dilemmas of nuclear deterrence. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

22 L. Freedman, The evolution of nuclear strategy (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2019

23 J. M. Acton, Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2018

deployments, or broader geopolitical competition. Consequently, regional conflicts may generate escalation dynamics with implications extending well beyond their immediate theatres.

The continued erosion of the international arms control architecture further amplifies these risks. The expiration or suspension of major bilateral agreements, limited prospects for new legally binding treaties, and the absence of comprehensive multilateral frameworks add up to reduced transparency and predictability among nuclear powers<sup>24</sup>. Without effective verification mechanisms and institutionalised strategic dialogue, uncertainty regarding military capabilities, intentions, and escalation thresholds is likely to increase.

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***the multipolar nuclear environment complicates strategic decision-making itself. Political leaders must operate under conditions of greater informational uncertainty***

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Finally, the multipolar nuclear environment complicates strategic decision-making itself. Political leaders must operate under conditions of greater informational uncertainty, compressed decision timelines, and a wider range of possible escalation pathways. Traditional deterrence models, largely developed for relatively stable bilateral competition, provide only partial guidance for managing crises involving several nuclear-armed states with

divergent strategic cultures and asymmetric capabilities<sup>25</sup>.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the principal danger of the emerging nuclear order lies not necessarily in the increased probability of intentional nuclear war, but in the growing complexity of strategic interaction. Multipolarity creates an environment in which uncertainty, interconnected crises, technological innovation, and institutional fragmentation collectively increase the risk of escalation despite the absence of any actor deliberately seeking nuclear conflict.

### **Preserving Strategic Stability in a Multipolar Nuclear Order**

The transition to a multipolar nuclear environment requires a corresponding evolution in the mechanisms designed to preserve strategic stability. Institutions developed during the Cold War were largely intended to regulate strategic competition between the two superpowers through legally binding arms control agreements, verification procedures, and bilateral crisis-management arrangements. While these instruments contributed significantly to reducing nuclear risks, they are unlikely to provide a sufficient framework for managing the more complex strategic relationships that characterise the contemporary international system.

Future approaches to strategic stability are therefore likely to place greater emphasis on nuclear risk management rather than traditional arms limitation. Instead of seeking comprehensive agreements covering all categories of nuclear weapons,

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24 T. D. Grant, *Nuclear Arms Control in Peril: Why the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Matters and How to Save It*, Policy Press: Bristol, 2024.

25 V. Narang, *Nuclear strategy in the modern era: Regional powers and international conflict*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2014

states may increasingly pursue narrower arrangements focused on reducing uncertainty, improving communication, and preventing unintended escalation. Such an approach reflects the recognition that strategic competition is likely to persist, even when political conditions do not permit ambitious arms control negotiations.

One important priority is the institutionalisation of strategic dialogue. Regular communication among nuclear-armed states remains essential for clarifying strategic intentions, discussing doctrinal developments, and reducing the risk of misperception during periods of heightened tension. Unlike Cold War bilateral dialogue, however, future strategic consultations will need to accommodate a more diverse group of actors with different capabilities, threat perceptions, and regional security interests. Although comprehensive multilateral negotiations remain politically difficult, issue-specific dialogue involving different combinations of nuclear powers may provide a more realistic basis for confidence-building.

Crisis management mechanisms will also require further adaptation. Existing military-to-military communication channels, political hotlines, advance notification arrangements, and procedures for managing incidents should be expanded and modernised to reflect the realities of contemporary strategic competition. Particular attention should be devoted to preventing escalation resulting from cyber operations, interference with early-warning systems, activities in outer space, and the increasing interaction between conventional and nuclear military capabilities. Crisis-management arrangements should therefore extend beyond traditional nuclear issues,

and address the broader technological environment in which future crises are likely to develop.

Transparency and confidence-building measures are likely to remain important even in the absence of legally binding arms control agreements. Voluntary exchanges of information regarding military doctrines, strategic modernisation programmes, missile launch notifications, and major military exercises can contribute to reducing uncertainty and limiting opportunities for strategic miscalculation<sup>26</sup>. Although such measures cannot substitute for formal verification regimes, they may help preserve a degree of predictability during periods of geopolitical confrontation.



***Unlike Cold War bilateral dialogue, however, future strategic consultations will need to accommodate a more diverse group of actors with different capabilities, threat perceptions, and regional security interests***

The growing role of emerging technologies also suggests that future nuclear diplomacy should extend beyond discussions of warhead numbers and delivery systems. Artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, autonomous systems, missile defence, and counter-space technologies increasingly influence strategic stability, by affecting decision-making, escalation dynamics, and the survivability of nuclear forces. Effective governance of these technologies is therefore becoming an integral component of broader efforts to reduce nuclear risks.

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<sup>26</sup> T. D. Grant, *Nuclear Arms Control in Peril: Why the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Matters and How to Save it*, Policy Press: Bristol, 2024.

Preserving strategic stability in the twenty-first century will ultimately depend less on restoring the institutional architecture of the Cold War than on developing a more flexible and adaptive framework capable of managing strategic competition among multiple nuclear powers. Such a framework is unlikely to eliminate rivalry or prevent all crises<sup>27</sup>. Its primary objective should instead be to preserve communication, enhance transparency where possible, reduce incentives for unintended escalation, and strengthen political mechanisms capable of preventing strategic competition from escalating into nuclear conflict.

## Conclusions

The contemporary international nuclear order differs fundamentally from the strategic environment in which the concept of strategic stability originally emerged. The transition from bipolarity to an increasingly multipolar distribution of nuclear capabilities has altered the logic of deterrence, expanded the number of strategic interactions, and increased the complexity of managing escalation. At the same time, the gradual erosion of the traditional arms control architecture, and the rapid development of emerging military technologies have further weakened many of the institutional and conceptual foundations that contributed to strategic stability during the Cold War.

These developments do not imply that the principles of deterrence have become obsolete. Mutual vulnerability, credible second-strike capabilities, and strategic communication all remain central elements of nuclear stability. However, they no longer provide a sufficiently strong framework for understanding the dynamics of a nuclear

environment, characterised by multiple actors, asymmetric capabilities, regional deterrence relationships, and increasingly interconnected security challenges. Strategic stability can no longer be viewed solely through the lens of bilateral nuclear parity, but must instead be understood as a multidimensional process involving political, military, technological, and institutional factors.



***Artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, autonomous systems, missile defence, and counter-space technologies increasingly influence strategic stability, by affecting decision-making, escalation dynamics, and the survivability of nuclear forces***

The evolving roles of Russia, China and North Korea illustrate different pathways through which the global nuclear landscape is being transformed. Their strategies demonstrate that contemporary nuclear competition is no longer defined exclusively by the size of nuclear arsenals, but increasingly by the interaction of military modernisation, political signalling, regional security dynamics, and technological innovation. As a result, future strategic competition is likely to become more fragmented, less predictable, and more difficult to regulate through existing institutional arrangements.

Under these conditions, preserving strategic stability will require moving beyond the assumptions that shaped Cold War arms control and deterrence policy. While comprehensive multilateral arms control

27 B. Tertrais, *The war that must never be fought: Dilemmas of nuclear deterrence*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

agreements remain a desirable long-term objective, current geopolitical realities suggest that more flexible and adaptive approaches to nuclear risk reduction will become increasingly important. Strategic dialogue, crisis-management mechanisms, transparency measures, and cooperation on the implications of emerging technologies are likely to play a growing role in reducing the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

Ultimately, strategic stability in the twenty-first century should be understood not as the preservation of a static balance of power, but as the continuous management of strategic competition in an international system

characterised by uncertainty, technological change, and multiple centres of nuclear decision-making. The challenge facing policymakers is therefore not to recreate the institutions of the Cold War, but to develop new forms of nuclear governance, capable of reducing risks while accommodating the realities of an increasingly multipolar world.

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