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Joint Statement on Strategic Stability: Managing the US-Russia Relationship under Strategic Competition

Hirofumi Tosaki (Senior Research Fellow, The Japan Institute of International Affairs)

The first US-Russia summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin was held in Geneva on June 16, 2021, and the two presidents issued a "US-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability."^① This article analyzes this Joint Statement from the perspective of managing the US-Russian relations amid the strategic competition.

Managing the US-Russian Relationship in Periods of Tension

The Joint Statement, consisting of three paragraphs, begins by stating that "the United States and Russia have demonstrated that, even in periods of tension, they are able to make progress on our shared goals of ensuring predictability in the strategic sphere, reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war."

Strategic stability--a situation where the possibility of a nuclear war breaking out is low--and arms control as a measure to maintain it were among the few agenda items that allowed the two countries to cooperate for the common interest of avoiding all-out nuclear war, even in the midst of severe US-Soviet confrontation during the Cold War. In addition, arms control negotiations provided a communication channel between the two adversaries lacking opportunities for interaction, and helped alleviate mutual suspicion and distrust.

Since the end of the Cold War, strategic stability and arms control have been used as means of managing less stable, though not hostile, US-Russian relations so that they do not lead to decisive confrontation, e.g., the negotiation of a Third Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START III) in the late 1990s, as Russia became increasingly dissatisfied with the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as well as the US' development of theater missile defense (TMD) systems; the conclusion of the Strategic Offensive Capabilities Reduction Treaty (SORT) in 2002 after the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; and the adoption of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2010, one of the purposes of which was to "reset" deteriorating US-Russian relations.

Such expectations for strategic stability and arms control seemed to be alive and well in Geneva despite US-Russian relations being called the "worst" in the post-Cold War era and the two leaders holding separate post-meeting press conferences. The "Joint Statement on Strategic Stability" was the only document that the United States and Russia jointly issued at the summit meeting, which means that strategic stability and arms control were taken up again as a means of managing the relationship because they have a number of issues that are not easily amenable to resolution or cooperation.

Reaffirming the Principle

In the second paragraph of the Joint Statement, the US and Russian presidents "reaffirm[ed] the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." Needless to say, this principle was first agreed upon by President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev at the US-Soviet summit in Geneva in November 1985, and expressed in their joint statement. At that time, the United States and the Soviet Union were in a serious dispute over the arms race in strategic nuclear forces and intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), as well as over the US' Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). After that summit meeting, however, the nuclear arms control negotiations began to make progress. The summit meeting also became an opportunity for the US-Soviet relationship, which had deteriorated to the extent that it was being labeled the "New Cold War" in the early 1980s, to take a major turn toward easing tensions, which eventually led to the end of the Cold War.

Although the situation is different from what it was then, US-Russia and US-China strategic competition has been rapidly intensifying in recent years as the US-Russia relationship deteriorated in the 2010s over, for instance, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the rapid growth of China's economic and military power. In response to such circumstances, these three countries and other nuclear-armed states have renewed their recognition of the importance of nuclear deterrence, and they have been accelerating the modernization of their nuclear forces. It is precisely because nuclear arms control and disarmament continue to stagnate, with few bright ideas emerging for revitalizing them, that various actors have raised the idea that the international community, in particular the nuclear-armed states, should once again return to the above-mentioned principle. Of course, reaffirmation of the principle

alone will not immediately improve the situation surrounding nuclear weapons. Rather, a critical view would regard this principle as the only agreement that the United States and Russia were able to reach at this point. Nevertheless, the reaffirmation of the principle by the nuclear superpowers was a minimal first step toward agreement on and implementation of concrete measures.

Strategic Stability Dialogue

The last paragraph of the Joint Statement says: "the United States and Russia will embark together on an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue in the near future that will be deliberate and robust. Through this Dialogue, we seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures." As seen in this sentence, the "Strategic Stability Dialogue" has two qualifiers: "bilateral" and "integrated."

First, "bilateral" means that the Biden administration has moved away from the Donald Trump administration's policy of aiming to hold trilateral arms control talks including China, at least for the time being. When the United States and Russia agreed on a five-year extension of the New START in February 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested Washington intends to pursue further nuclear weapons reductions between the United States and Russia first, saying: "The United States will use the time provided by a five-year extension of the New START Treaty to pursue with the Russian Federation...arms control that addresses all of its nuclear weapons. We will also pursue arms control to reduce the dangers from China's modern and growing nuclear arsenal."^②

Of course, the Biden administration also expects to incorporate China--which it positioned as the US' only competitor in the existing international order in its "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance" released in March 2021, and which has been the most active in undertaking nuclear modernization--into a framework of substantial nuclear arms control. However, while the United States and Russia possess more than 5,000 nuclear weapons respectively, China is estimated to have about 350, so there is still a large numerical disparity. Since Beijing consistently insists that the United States and Russia, the world's largest nuclear powers, drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals first, it will not be easy to convince China to join the United States and Russia in a process of limiting and reducing nuclear arsenals. At a briefing before the US-Russia summit, a senior US administration official described the policy of the Biden administration by saying, "I think, ultimately, we are going to need to have a sustained conversation with China on arms control-related issues. But the President has made clear that, at the outset, a bilateral discussion between the two biggest nuclear powers in the world is the way to start."^③

On the other hand, what is meant by "integrated" is not explicitly stated. If it means that multiple weapons systems relevant to strategic stability between the US and Russia are to be included in the dialogue, Washington is highly likely to want to include not only strategic nuclear forces but also non-strategic nuclear forces in which Russia has an numerical advantage vis-à-vis the United States, as well

as "exotic" nuclear delivery means (hypersonic boost glide vehicles, other hypersonic missiles, unmanned long-range nuclear torpedoes, and nuclear-propelled cruise missiles) that Russia is actively developing. Moscow, on the other hand, will demand that the US-promoted ballistic missile defense (BMD) be subject to arms control, as it has been insisting for years. In addition, non-nuclear attacks with strategic implications, which are being closely monitored by both countries and are also mentioned in their respective nuclear postures, could be a subject of discussion, especially significant cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure as well as nuclear command, control and communications (NC3).^④

The United States hopes to conclude a follow-on arms control treaty with Russia before the New START expires in February 2026. However, given the expansion of weapons systems that affect strategic stability and the complexity of their inter-relationships, especially the considerable differences of opinion between the United States and Russia on the treatment of strategic and non-strategic, offensive and defensive, and nuclear and non-nuclear weapons, it will not be easy for the United States and Russia to reconcile their views on the weapons systems to be covered by treaties, control and reduction methods, and verification measures.

Reducing Nuclear Risks

A low hanging fruit in the short term would be to explore an agreement on nuclear risk reduction measures. While the United States and Russia have not presented concrete proposals on nuclear risk reduction, some non-nuclear-weapon states and experts have proposed a variety of measures. Among them, the Stockholm Initiative, led by Sweden with participation from mainly Western non-nuclear-weapon states including Japan, has listed the following measures that would contribute to nuclear risk reduction among "actionable" implementation measures:^⑤

- discussions on nuclear doctrine and declaration policies;
- reports on nuclear arsenals and plans for their modernization;
- dialogues to assess, minimize and address nuclear risks by, for instance, adopting measures aimed at preventing crises, extending decision-making time in crises and taking measures to minimize potential vulnerabilities emerging from disruptive technologies and cyber threats (e.g., to command and control functions);
- establishment of crisis communication protocols, e.g., hotlines and risk reduction centers; and
- submission of reports on the implementation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)

It is unquestionably preferable that such nuclear risk reduction measures be discussed and implemented by the nuclear superpowers. In the meantime, those measures and others designed to improve transparency and predictability should be carried out not only by the United States and Russia but also by other nuclear-armed states, especially China as a leading actor in the strategic competition,

given that the main nuclear threats today are the escalation of gray-zone situations or armed conflicts into a limited use of nuclear weapons, or inadvertent nuclear escalation due to misunderstandings, misidentifications and accidents at various flashpoints in regions that are the focus of strategic competition. Such efforts can also be expected to serve as a precursor to a shift from bilateral US-Russian to multilateral nuclear arms control. Moreover, serious discussions and the commencement of possible measures to reduce nuclear risks by the United States, Russia and other nuclear-armed states would help create at least a slightly more favorable atmosphere for the next NPT Review Conference (postponed from April 2020), which will be held in the midst of a difficult nuclear situation.

① "US-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability," June 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/>.

② Antony J. Blinken, "On the Extension of the New START Treaty with the Russian Federation," Press Statement, February 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/on-the-extension-of-the-new-start-treaty-with-the-russian-federation/>.

③ "Background Press Gaggle by Senior Administration Officials En Route Geneva, Switzerland," White House, June 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/06/15/background-press-gaggle-by-senior-administration-officials-en-route-geneva-switzerland/>.

④ Regarding weapons systems that would be included in US-Russian strategic stability and arms control, see, for instance, Rose Gottemoeller, "A Former Nuclear Negotiator's Advice for Biden and Putin," *Politico*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/06/14/biden-putin-summit-nuclear-treaty-start-494313>; James M. Acton, "How Will U.S.-Russia Arms Control Affect the Geneva Summit?" Carnegie Moscow Center, June 14, 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84754>. In the bilateral Strategic Security Dialogue convened in the latter half of 2020, three working groups on nuclear warheads and doctrine, verification, and space were established.

⑤ "Ministerial Meeting of the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament," February 25, 2020, <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/un-geneva/current/news/stockholm-initiative-for-nuclear-disarmament/>.