Navigating Multipolarity: Reimagining Process Design for Future Strategic Stability Frameworks

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Abstract: *As the international security landscape transitions from Cold War bipolarity to contemporary multipolarity, the classical paradigm of arms control is increasingly ill-suited to address emerging strategic challenges. The rise of China as a major military and nuclear power, the erosion of existing arms control agreements, the dysfunctional siloed (if not frozen) inter-state dialogues, and the proliferation of emerging and disruptive technologies collectively signal a breakdown of traditional strategic stability frameworks. This paper examines the theoretical limitations of mainstream schools of arms control and limitations of current diplomatic practice before arguing for a fundamental rethinking of process design in strategic stability negotiations. Drawing from the interdisciplinary field of peace process mediation, the paper identifies key variables—such as timing, dialogue formats, sequencing, diplomatic orchestration, and inclusivity—that can inform a more adaptive and process-oriented approach to great-power arms control. Rather than prescribing a fixed model, the paper advocates for a shift toward ecosystem-based, multi-track diplomatic strategies that incorporate lessons from conflict mediation to better navigate the complexity of modern multipolar deterrence relationships. Such radical reimagining is essential not only to reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation and an arms race, but also to generate new pathways toward more cooperative security among the United States, Russia, China, and beyond.*

In 1986, amidst the intense geopolitical rivalry of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union convened in Reykjavik, Iceland, to negotiate far-reaching nuclear arms control measures. Although they fell short of a comprehensive agreement, the summit marked a turning point in superpower diplomacy and offered a glimpse of what nuclear disarmament might achieve under a bipolar world order. Roughly forty years later, despite the once promising outlook for nuclear arms reduction in between, the geopolitical landscape has evolved to another level of uncertainty. The clear-cut standoff between two Cold War nuclear superpowers has given way to a multipolarising world filled with many new variables, among which the biggest one, arguably, is the rise of China.

China's economic growth has been unparalleled compared to any other country in the world, rising from 2.5% of global GDP in 1980 to over 18% in 2020 and simultaneously increasing from 6.7% to 68.8% relative to the US GDP within the same timeframe.[1] Regarding military power, China's advancement has been equally remarkable. By around 2020, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) had expanded to become the

largest navy globally in terms of warship count, with shipbuilding capabilities surpassing those of the United States.[2] All of these developments seemed to be waiting for another shockwave in the domain of strategic weapons, which finally arrived in the 2020s. Since the summer of 2021, over 300 silos that are believed to house intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) have been discovered in western China, prompting the US Department of Defense to speculate that China intends to shift away from its longstanding minimum deterrent strategy towards achieving nuclear parity with the United States and Russia. Combined with its largest intermediate-range missile arsenal in the world, the first deployment of operational hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) in the world, a steadily advancing space program, and cutting-edge capabilities in artificial intelligence (AI), China has become the most significant new variable in shaping the future strategic stability among big powers.

This strategic transformation coincides with the erosion of existing arms control frameworks. Key bilateral treaties between the US and Russia—such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and potentially the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)—have collapsed or are at risk, while multilateral forums like the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) struggle to maintain credibility amidst great-power rivalry and emerging nuclear aspirants. Simultaneously, emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs)—including hypersonic weapons, space capabilities, and AI—are entangling conventional and nuclear domains, generating new escalation risks and rendering many Cold War-era concepts outdated.

Yet despite the magnitude of these shifts, the strategic stability literature and associated diplomatic processes have struggled to keep pace. Much of the existing theoretical work still centers on the Cold War dyad or overly relies on frameworks ill-suited to multipolar, multi-domain realities. While there has been a growing body of work on China's strategic rise and the implications of EDTs, relatively little attention has been given to the process design and sequencing necessary for building a new, inclusive, and sustainable strategic stability framework that incorporates both legacy nuclear actors and new variables like China, emerging technologies, and cross-domain entanglements.

This paper argues that addressing the current impasse in arms control requires not just a shift in substantive focus—from quantitative parity to qualitative risk reduction—but also a rethinking of the diplomatic process architecture through which strategic stability can be pursued. Rather than simply trying to retrofit Cold War-era models to contemporary realities, scholars and practitioners must consider alternative frameworks for structuring dialogue and negotiation. To that end, this paper proposes drawing insights from adjacent fields—particularly peace process mediation and conflict resolution—which offer tools for navigating complex, multi-actor, multi-issue environments.

By analysing existing theoretical schools of arms control, the evolution of diplomatic practice, and the lessons from other complex negotiation contexts, this study aims to open a debate on the pathways—sequenced, mediated, and pluralistic—through which future strategic stability might be reimagined. It does not propose a definitive model, but rather highlights the critical need for interdisciplinary thinking and process innovation

at a time when traditional arms control mechanisms appear increasingly inadequate to address 21st-century risks.

Literature Review and Challenges to Existing Theories

Arms Control: Main Schools of Thought

Arms control theories until the first decade of the 21st century, to our mind, can be roughly divided into two schools of thought. The first school—"classical school" so to be called in our paper—was born out of the discussions and writings in the Cambridge Community between 1958 and 1966.[3] In retrospect, one critical feature of this school is its endorsement of the international status quo, which is reflected by this school's general assumption that Russia had no interest in risking nuclear war to bring about drastic change in Europe or Asia.[4]

Scholars and practitioners of the classical school seek stability, and usually adopt strategic stability as their fundamental analytical framework. Although the term of strategic stability has no universally accepted definition and debates exist regarding the weight of various independent variables, in the arms control community, scholars and practitioners most often define it as the combination of crisis stability and arms race stability. Crisis stability refers to a status where neither state has an incentive to use nuclear weapons first in a crisis; arms race stability refers to a status where neither state has an incentive to engage in an arms race.[5]

Naturally, scholars and practitioners of this school of thought take arms control as an issue of calculation. Many core concepts of classical school and strategic stability, including unacceptable damage, mutual assured destruction, and mutual vulnerability, rely on technical calculations. Meanwhile, they argue for legally binding, verifiable treaties to implement these calculations. During and after the Cold War, a long list of scholars ranging from Hedley Bull and George Bunn to Thomas Graham Jr. and Michael Krepon primarily use this framework.

The second school of thought—"reformist school" in this paper—emerged during the Cold War era already. This school questions whether the classical school focuses too much on arms control itself that it deems arms control and maintaining status quo the natural end. For instance, in the 1970s, Bernard Brodie already argued that the "persistent failure to clarify and analyze objectives" was the main reason for the failure of most arms control work to be "of any utility for the policymaker."[6] Similarly, in the 1980s, James Barber argued that arms control and relevant treaties are possible means to several ends, but not the ends in themselves.[7]

With the international security status changing dramatically and the end of a bipolar system, scholars and practitioners of this school burgeoned and began to more actively redefine the goal of arms control—expanding from maintaining status quo and preventing nuclear wars to containing non-traditional issues such as terrorism and proliferation.[8] They criticised that the nuclear-weapons states remained entrenched in Cold War paradigms of threat and deterrence—hence the classically dogmatic calculation of strategic stability—and instead, stressed the need to reconsider the role of nuclear deterrence. One key argument is that with the bipolar system gone, the US

military preponderance creates the issue of inequality, which then forces actors outside of the US alliance to pursue asymmetrical deterrent strategies, including terrorism and proliferation. The solution that this school offered, in turn, is to reassure the disadvantaged and set the central goal of arms control not to deter but to reassure.[9]

Entering the New Era: Theoretical and Reality Challenges

The classical school of arms control theory provides a foundation for arms control analysis and is highly explanatory of US and Soviet arms control practices during the Cold War. For instance, this school explains the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty as a way to ensure states' second-strike capabilities and to reduce their desire for first strike by restricting missile defense systems; it also explains that the INF Treaty reduces the likelihood of theater-level crisis and arms racing by banning INF-range missiles altogether. However, the classical school is not suited to explain many arms control trends after the Cold War, such as the US's withdrawal from the ABM and INF treaties. It is fair to say that with the international system transitioning to a more complex polar structure and the China variable becoming increasingly significant as discussed in the previous section, the classical school theory that is rooted in the assumption that the world is in a bipolar system is gradually losing its relevance.

The reformist school was on the right track in adapting to the multipolarising world. However, when defining the international security priorities of the post-Cold War era, it made a shift that may be too big to the degree that traditional major-power stability is undervalued. It is true that in the years immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, proliferation and terrorism were the primary security threats to international security, but entering the 2010s, as major-power struggles began to resurface, the reformist school "suddenly" fell behind. This "falling behind" is particularly evident in the lack of systematic academic work of incorporating China into the international arms control mechanism. For years, for instance, in the academic discussions in European arms control communities, China was not even a topic; it was not until the 2020s when arms control seminars in Europe suddenly featured sessions on China.[10] In US institutions, things were slightly better, with individual arms control scholars such as Brad Roberts, Taylor Fravel, Tong Zhao, and Fiona Cunningham consistently studying China. However, despite the frequent calls from the US government, especially under President Trump, to address the China problem in the INF and New START treaties, few academic works that systematically incorporate China were proposed or elaborated.

Another key challenge facing both schools as well as all practitioners is the issue of entanglement, both on dual-use/conventional-nuclear entanglement and cross-domain entanglement. This by no means suggests that the two schools did not study this significant issue: the classical school did so by focusing on escalation ladders, crisis management, limited nuclear war, and nuclear brinkmanship,[11] whereas the reformists expanded the debate by incorporating threats posed by non-state actors and precision-guided weapons.[12] But it was not until the 2010s when a considerable amount of scholarly work discusses in detail the impact of EDTs such as hypersonic, cyber warfare, AI, space, and cross-domain hybrid operations on strategic stability.[13] This is understandable as many of these EDTs did only burgeon after the 2010s. However, despite the growing consensus among scholars and practitioners on incorporating these

factors into a strategic stability framework of our era, so far, these studies have largely fallen into arms control "silos", with limited depth on the broader process design and diplomatic sequencing required to foster a framework of this kind.

Current Challenges in Diplomatic Practice

There is broad acceptance also among diplomatic practitioners that a reimagining of a strategic stability framework is needed. In the current geopolitical context, with multiple treaties expiring or withdrawn and several nuclear weapon states building up their nuclear forces, it is fair to believe that the chapter of the (post-)Cold War arms control regime has closed and a new arms race is on the way. This section addresses the current challenges in diplomatic practice that impede any progress towards a future strategic stability framework.

The Multipolarity Puzzle in Strategic Stability Dialogues and Diplomacy

First of all, the format of multipolarity itself remains a puzzle. The multilateral platforms, the US-China-Russia triangular dynamics, the bilateral dynamics between these states, and their intersections are all parts of this puzzle. Currently, there is no vision of a meaningful diplomatic process; even at the most foundational level, bilateral diplomacy between the largest nuclear powers is stuck. This section addresses the challenges from the multilateral to the minilateral and the bilateral level. It will furthermore argue that there is a need to move beyond the old paradigm of the Cold War and re-imagine a multi-track process approach.

Multilateral and Minilateral Diplomacy

As multilateral arms control mechanisms are being significantly weakened due to great power competition, military build-ups, and the use of nuclear rhetoric in (potential) conflict, the current challenge to most diplomats around the world is to prevent a deterioration of the current regime. After all, the trend in our era has reversed from non-proliferation to proliferation: countries that feel threatened by neighbouring great powers and the breakdown of alliances are now debating acquiring or hosting a nuclear deterrent. Multilateral flagships such as the NPT are under pressure, and rounds of NPT PrepCom have failed to deliver any agreement, casting a shadow over the NPT RevCon 2026.

On the minilateral level, the P5 process—a mechanism set up in 2007 for the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—has only delivered nominal or signalling values in preserving the foundations of the NPT. Over the past nearly two decades, besides convening numerous dialogues on doctrines discussion, in terms of deliverables, the P5 process has only achieved a Glossary of Key Nuclear Terms and a Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races.[14] In other words, with geopolitical tensions running higher each year, the P5 process is unlikely to move the needle towards a new strategic stability framework.

US-Russia-China Trilateral Talks

Against the backdrop of rapidly deteriorating US-Russia and US-China relations, the first Trump Administration's National Security Strategy in 2017 described a return to great power competition. The US administration no longer welcomed a "stable and prosperous China"[15], but increasingly views China as a challenger to US economic and security interests globally, citing, amongst others, China's military modernisation and nuclear expansion. The US-Russia bilateral arms control frameworks further crumbled during the first Trump Administration, with the Trump Administration pulling out of the INF Treaty (citing Russian non-compliance and Chinese missile advantage) and dragging its feet in negotiations to extend New START beyond 2021. President Trump had insisted that China should be coming into the fold throughout the negotiations. In 2020, on the NPT's 50th anniversary, President Trump said that he would be proposing "a bold new trilateral arms control initiative with Russia and China to help avoid an expensive arms race and instead work together to build a better, safer, and more prosperous future for all."[16] The Biden Administration seemed to be more pragmatic vis-a-vis China in seeking bilateral arms control talks as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and ensuing nuclear rhetoric had jeopardised arms control treaties and suspended US-Russia arms control talks. With the advent of the second Trump Administration, there seems to be a return to the rhetoric of President Trump's first term. Already in the first few weeks of the Trump Administration, President Trump has stated on several occasions his ambition of 'denuclearization'[17] because he does not want to enter into expensive (nuclear) arms races with either Russia or China.

It remains to be seen whether President Trump will be able to bring China to the table for trilateral arms control negotiations. China has persistently rejected a trilateral format because it insists that it is nowhere near on par with the US and Russia, and that it is the responsibility of the US and Russia to first bring their nuclear warheads down. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the US has a nuclear warhead stockpile of 3,708, the Russian Federation 4,380 and China of about 500.[18] Although experts often warn that China is quickly expanding and modernising, SIPRI estimates that "China's overall nuclear warhead stockpile is still expected to remain smaller than those states' [US, Russia] stockpiles."[19] In reply to Chinese arguments, US experts argue that it is not just about the numbers: China's rapid modernisation and nuclear expansion has a destabilising effect on global arms race stability[20] and any "arms control agreements that do not include China are incomplete, even if they provide for a measure of security and predictability in U.S.-Russian strategic relations"[21]. In addition, the US is increasingly questioning whether China's no first use (NFU) declaratory policy is credible and argues that China might be moving to a Launch-On-Warning posture.[22]

To promote strategic stability, especially in relation to arms race stability, it needs to involve at the very least the US, Russia, and China. However, the current geopolitical context makes it difficult to move to a trilateral format, and even if China agrees to come into the fold, it might be difficult to make meaningful progress on coming to a negotiated agreement in the near future. Only a few experts, such as Matthew Kroenig and Mark J. Massa, have made concrete proposals on how China could become part of a trilateral format taking China's concerns into consideration.[23] For example, they

consider a reduction of US and Russian warheads in exchange for a freeze of China's number of warheads, or a similar cap for all three, under which China could continue its nuclear buildup—but the US and Russia are unlikely to be satisfied as their relevant deterrent will be undermined. Another option would be a fissile material cut-off, for which China has only expressed conditional support as Beijing tends to link the issue with US missile defense and the weaponisation of outer space.[24] A revival of the INF Treaty in a trilateral format is also proposed, which Beijing is unlikely to accept without major US concessions as doing so would give up China's biggest advantage over the US in a Taiwan contingency and undermine the China-Russia balance.[25] The problem is that this approach towards achieving arms control frameworks is based on the old paradigm of Cold War-era arms control negotiations. With China—a country that lacks the long experience and culture of arms control negotiations—it is unlikely that replicating the same type of treaties and negotiation processes and simply adding China to the mix would work.

US-Russia

The US-Russia bilateral arms control framework is under serious pressure. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, disagreements over geopolitical intentions, nuclear modernisation, missile defense, and mutual compliance issues had been building. The situation worsened sharply in 2022, leading to a near-complete freeze in formal dialogue, including their Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) and the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) under the New START treaty. This was followed by the Russian suspension of its participation in the New START, which casts a shadow over the future after the treaty's expiration in February 2026.

Whether the US and Russia will extend or reinvent the treaty remains uncertain. As of early 2025, practitioners and scholars generally do not see the treaty's extension before its expiration as possible. Despite President Trump's pro-denuclearisation rhetoric after he returned to the White House, Moscow considers the prospects for amending and extending the treaty bleak.[26] Regarding the likelihood of reinventing the treaty or, at the very least, of both Russia and the US voluntarily keeping their strategic weapons under the limit, several factors complicate the issue.

First, on a structural level, Moscow does not see the value-added of compartmentalising the nuclear issue anymore. The post-Cold War geopolitical landscape is perceived as unfavourable to Russia. As a result, Moscow prefers issue linkage, combining nuclear arms control with geopolitical issues such as the future of Ukraine and settlement with NATO expansion. Second, Russia's self-perceived disadvantageous position and weakened conventional forces also make it more likely to rely on nuclear weapons rather than restrain its nuclear program. The same preference for reliance applies to EDTs, which, in theory, should be added to future US-Russia arms control negotiations to reflect EDT's impact on strategic stability.

Even if Washington and Moscow manage to resolve the abovementioned difficulties, technical issues still remain. Missile defense alone already looms large. For years, Washington has been reluctant to restrain its missile defense development and deployment, which deeply worries Moscow. The dynamics brought by the second

Trump Administration do not seem to provide any relief either: one of the very first executive orders issued by President Trump in 2025 aims to build the "Golden Dome" missile defense system to shield the continental US.

US-China

In contrast to the US and Russia, the US and China do not have experience of engaging in bilateral arms control frameworks. "Since the end of the Cold War, every US president has reached out to China in a bid to improve the strategic military relationship—and each has been rebuffed."[27] However, the two countries now have over 15 years of experience engaging in formal (though not sustained) and informal dialogues which started in the 2000s, most notably through the Track 1.5 "China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics Dialogue"[28] which were convened in Beijing and Hawaii twice a year over the course of 15 years until it was suspended in 2019 due to a loss of forward momentum.[29]

As US-China relations deteriorated over the last decade, so did the Track 1.5 dialogue become increasingly a talk shop without any progress towards any substantive confidence-building measures or arms control negotiations. [30] This is to the frustration of US officials and experts. It was believed that the Chinese government was using informal dialogue spaces to avoid sustained official nuclear dialogue.[31] In the first Trump Administration, US-China relations took a turn for the worse. Even though the Trump Administration intended to bring China into trilateral talks, few official dialogues took place in 2018,[32] and almost all informal dialogues were discontinued. Prior to the Biden and Xi meeting in Woodside in November 2023, a one-off dialogue between US and Chinese officials took place in Washington. While Biden and Xi agreed at the Woodside Summit to continue high-level diplomacy and interactions, including on the issue of arms control and non-proliferation,[33] China declined to schedule a subsequent meeting, and in July 2024, Beijing officially declared that these talks were suspended due to US arms sales to Taiwan.

Therein lies the crux for US-China dialogues: the Chinese have in recent years asserted a conditionality of convening official strategic stability dialogue on the temperature in the broader relationship, with strategic stability talks a "carrot" to give or take away from the Americans (citing "mutual respect" and China's "core interests"). The US, on the other hand, has thus far asserted that strategic stability dialogue is compartmentalised and should not be linked to good bilateral ties, with the logic that the need for strategic stability conversations is greater when bilateral relations sour. This is evident in the way "strategic stability" is perceived by both sides. While neither side officially defines the concept, the US generally perceives strategic stability as crisis stability and arms race stability, whereas it seems in the Track 1.5 dialogue that China views the term as a much broader concept related to its national security.[34][35] In essence, both concepts make sense: sustained stability in the Taiwan Strait and other flashpoints diminishes the risk of conventional military conflict, thereby lowering the risk of crossing the nuclear threshold or inadvertent escalation. Conversely, even—and particularly—within the context of an adversarial and competitive bilateral relationship, both parties retain a strategic incentive to avoid nuclear escalation and therefore engage in nuclear risk prevention and escalation management.

Even if the number of dialogues grows, the question of how to go beyond an exchange of positions remains. Several participants in the Hawaii-Beijing dialogue have argued that at the very minimum, the value of the Track 1.5 space is to advance a common strategic language and avoid misperceptions and misunderstandings.[36] However, moving towards confidence-building measures requires Track-1 talks, and usually involves a degree of transparency and crisis management measures, both of which have seemed difficult for China. China has perceived US calls for transparency to be disingenuous in the absence of nuclear parity, as transparency would threaten the survivability and credibility of China's limited nuclear deterrent.[37] Measures related to crisis management might sound more feasible but have run into obstacles, because Chinese military doctrine is generally confident in being able to effectively control a crisis from escalating.[38]

Academics and experts have weighed in on how to unlock a meaningful US-China dialogue with practical suggestions. Tong Zhao, for example, has made several suggestions of short-term cooperative measures such as the US and Russia jointly briefing the Chinese on confidence-building measures or inviting the Chinese to mock verification inspections.[39] On the Chinese side, scholars stress the importance of resuming Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogue with a focus on confidence-building measures and promoting crisis stability, arguing that the time is not right for nuclear disarmament talks.[40] During the official US-China (one-off) dialogue in November 2023, the US made three proposals for strategic risk reduction to the Chinese delegation, to which the Chinese side did not respond: a strategic crisis hotline between strategic commands, missile launch notifications, and measures for space deconfliction.[41] However, in September 2024 China notified the US in advance of an ICBM test to avoid miscalculation.[42] The prospect for substantive progress towards confidence-building measures and nuclear risk reduction is low and would require longer-term sustained Track 1 dialogue. There is even a slimmer chance of any progress on arms control or a strategic stability framework through a US-China dialogue.

Russia-China

In discussions around future arms control agreements or frameworks, academics and experts usually focus on the trilateral, the US-Russia bilateral, or the US-China bilateral. However, in any future strategic stability framework that involves at least the three great powers, it is essential to consider the Russia-China dynamics as well.

While Russia and China historically exhibited an awkward relationship marked by mutual suspicion—stemming from territorial disputes, ideological debates, and competing regional ambitions—as of late 2010s they have managed to find a pragmatic alignment based on shared strategic interests, achieving "its best in history."[43] At present, they both share a common interest to resist the US hegemonic position in the world, but whereas Russia intends to sabotage the US-led global order, China has benefited from the current order and merely hopes to re-furbish it into something more benign to itself. This is an important distinction because it has profound implications for their approach to strategic stability and mechanisms such as the NPT.

One reflection of this distinction on the nuclear postures of Russia and China, for instance, is that Russia is willing to integrate nuclear options into its means of projecting power against the West (such as voicing nuclear threats and, after the Kremlin revised its doctrine in late 2024, reserving options of nuclear use in response to non-nuclear weapons threats to Russia and its allies), whereas China so far has maintained a limited, defensive posture (unconditional no-first-use policy and negative security assurance). This distinction can also be observed in their respective quantity of deployed warheads: according to SIPRI Yearbook 2025, Russia has 1718, same level as the US, whereas China has 24.[44] This divergence means that while both Russia and China rhetorically oppose US hegemony, they have limited common ground when it comes to the fundamental principles of nuclear deterrence and escalation control, making it difficult for Moscow and Beijing to agree on a strategic arms control framework that would require aligning on what constitutes an acceptable nuclear posture.

Chinese and Russian differing stances on the overseas deployment of nuclear weapons and extended deterrence—also a reflection of Russia's power projection versus China's declared defensive posture—may also in the long run affect how China and Russia coordinate their positions at the NPT. So far, due to the shared interest in countering the US, China has turned a blind eye to Russia for deploying warheads in Belarus and instead only criticising the US, but given time, this fundamental difference may hinder their dynamics at the NPT.

The Impact of Emerging Technologies and Conventional-Nuclear Entanglement

Arms control is not just a multi-player but also a multi-domain puzzle. Any future strategic stability framework will probably be unsustainable if it deals with nuclear capabilities alone in a quantitative-based approach only. As described earlier, there is currently an academic and expert debate about the impact of emerging technologies such as AI on strategic stability and arms control.[45] Many experts and scholars grapple with understanding the many ways that the transformative nature of these technologies (might) impact both nuclear command, control and communications, as well as how their integration in conventional weapons might exacerbate the risk of inadvertent escalation through conventional-nuclear entanglement.[46] For example, an accident or a conventional attack on a satellite could unintentionally damage an adversary's nuclear command or early-warning systems, possibly leading to the perception that it was an intentional strike aimed at disabling their nuclear capabilities or even interpreted as a prelude to a nuclear attack. Another destabilising effect arises from AI-enabled intelligence gathering. Whether through analysing vast amounts of satellite imagery to detect and track mobile missiles or nuclear silos, or using maritime sensors to monitor nuclear-armed submarines,[47] such technologies undermine the geographical ambiguity of nuclear weapons, thereby compromising a country's second-strike capability. The integration of emerging technologies in the military domain could also "shape the more structural features of the nuclear balance that fall under the banner of strategic stability"[48], because the mainstreaming of AI in military applications will have a profound impact on force structure and posture and therefore on strategic calculations.[49] While the war in Ukraine has been a "preview of ways that emerging technologies could contribute to escalation in the future both before or during conflicts", much remains

hypothetical and we are yet to witness the full extent to which the advancement and integration of new technologies will impact the nuclear domain and strategic stability more broadly.

Bearing in mind this uncertainty and much-debated hypothetical scenarios, it becomes difficult to integrate this as a variable into any future strategic stability framework. Yet, it is imperative that it is addressed before it has been adopted and integrated without restraint. The stakes are high, as it is widely believed that U.S.-China competition is increasingly playing out in the technological domain due to a shared belief that future warfare and global dominance will hinge on technological supremacy. This trend is manifesting in areas such as AI models, quantum computing, cyber warfare, and semiconductors, with both nations investing heavily in emerging technologies as a way to secure strategic advantage.

There is fortunately a proliferation of summits and Track 1.5/Track 2 dialogues that address AI safety and governance,[50] and some initial steps to integrate these questions in broader strategic stability discussions. However, we cannot envision a future strategic stability framework without any agreement on certain restraints on the adoption of disruptive technologies in the nuclear and nuclear-adjacent domain.

Learning from the Complexity of Peace Processes

Academic debate has focused on the only framework of reference for arms control it knows: the Cold War and post-Cold War arms control negotiations, bilateral treaties and multilateral frameworks. This paradigm is unfit for purpose. There is a need for a discussion on how to navigate multipolarity in a future process towards a strategic stability framework involving, at the very least, the US, Russia, and China. This discussion also needs to cover the scope of such a future strategic stability framework—considering whether such future strategic stability, both crisis and arms race stability, should include also (elements of) new domains such as the yet unknown future implications of AI, quantum, or outer space. Without being prescriptive on process design, this paper argues that the arms control community should move beyond an analysis of the complexity of the current geopolitical landscape and beyond a debate on confidence-building measures in each of these dialogue settings. The multi-player cross-domain complexity requires a radical re-imagination of a process that can lead to a future strategic stability framework. This could at the very least reduce the risk of (inadvertent) escalation and perhaps even reverse the trend towards proliferation and a (nuclear) arms race.

Rather than focusing on historical case studies of arms control, there might be value in an interdisciplinary approach. There is a large body of literature focused on peace processes, armed conflict resolution and mediation that addresses process design and sequencing in a complex context with a high number of players and issues that interact with each other. Most of these studies analyse past peace processes to distill theoretical frameworks and causal relations of factors of the process, players, etc., on the outcomes of the negotiations. There are a number of important aspects arising from this epistemic community that could be studied further in how it could be applied to dialogues towards a future strategic stability framework.

Timing

There is, first of all, the question of timing, to assess whether a conflict is ripe or ready to be negotiated. Based on the current geopolitical situation and the obstacles in the multilateral, trilateral, and bilateral dialogue settings, many in the arms control community have concluded that the time is not right for trilateral disarmament and arms control talks. Scholars of peace processes have debated the "ripeness" or "readiness" of a conflict to be negotiated, meaning, according to Zartman's foundational work, that all sides recognise that continuing the hostilities would be more detrimental to their interests than resolving the conflict[51]. Numerous scholars have critiqued or elaborated upon this theory because peace negotiations often have many drivers of complexity[52] (e.g., parties are non-monolithic, have fundamentally different worldviews, etc.), making it difficult to understand when a conflict might be ripe or ready to be negotiated. It would be helpful to build on this body of analysis and apply it to strategic stability. Would the US, Russia, China (and others) be ready or ripe for a negotiated agreement as all sides stand to gain more from a negotiated arms control agreement than continuing down a path that leads to a new (nuclear) arms race?

Dialogue Setting and Mediators

Second, even if the parties would rationally stand to benefit from arms control (because an arms race is expensive and brings instability and volatility), it might be difficult to overcome the gridlock in their dialogue settings. President Trump's unconventional approach might provide new impetus to initial US-Russia talks, but it remains to be seen whether the Trump Administration (and beyond) can sustain a dialogue process towards a new strategic stability framework.

In national or regional peace processes, there is often a type of third-party mediator or facilitator to guide the conflict parties in a dialogue process. When it comes to arms control negotiations, there has historically been a more limited role for a third party to mediate, facilitate, or at the very least provide good offices to the parties. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, UN Secretary General U Thant facilitated a communication channel for the US and the USSR to walk back tensions and come to an agreement to resolve issues that laid the foundations for future US-USSR arms control negotiations.[53] However, in subsequent negotiations during the Cold War, the US and USSR preferred to negotiate through direct talks without a mediator influencing the agenda or the outcomes, though countries including Switzerland and Iceland provided good offices and neutral venues.

Great powers are understandably hesitant to allow mediation or facilitation by third parties on such sensitive issues at the heart of national security. However, as is demonstrated by literature from peace process mediation, many different roles for a mediator could be envisioned that might be helpful in overcoming the complexity of multipolarity or even the gridlock in bilateral dialogues. The arms control community could focus on lessons from successful and unsuccessful mediators in international peace processes or even past arms control negotiations and discuss how these might inform and envision the role and setup of a mediator in the current context.

One could, for example, envision how a set of co-mediators (e.g. retired diplomats or influential individuals with close ties to leaders) could work in parallel and complementarily to do initial scoping consultations with the US, Russia, and China—not for trilateral talks but parallel discussions. It is possible that great powers would be reluctant to embrace the role of a third party and that it would take a crisis like the Cuban Missile Crisis to demonstrate that they are on the brink of a precipice and need a third-party actor to help them get down the escalation ladder. A historical instance is that U Thant provided a backchannel through which the US and the Soviet Union de-escalated. In addition to the role of Track 1 mediators, one could also conceive of a third-party role of Track 1.5 and Track 2 interlocutors whose interactions could overcome entrenched positions and achieve more constructive and creative outcomes. Their way of overcoming entrenched positions may include: re-framing issues (some terms date back to the Cold War but may need to be re-framed to adjust to the contemporary reality), creating backchannels for direct or indirect messaging, and facilitating workshops or discussions that are focused on specific technical problems.

Sequencing

Another aspect to consider more in-depth is the strategy of sequencing in peace processes[54], specifically the chronological sequencing and the sequencing across different geographic and thematic settings, as well as across different levels. Instead of focusing on measures to "unlock" the stalemate in each dialogue channel separately, all of the above-described channels (trilateral, US-Russia, US-China, Russia-China, etc.) could be seen as an ecosystem of dialogue processes where, through sequencing of steps in each of these channels and perhaps linking of issues across (e.g. technology and arms control), one can move towards breakthroughs in other channels. Issue linkage in peace processes has also been used to create strategic incentives for each party to engage, making the conflict "ripe" for mediation.[55] The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Agreement (SALT I) and the ABM treaty provide an example of issue linkage in the nuclear context. Washington hoped to limit the large-scale deployment of ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) by the Soviet Union, whereas Moscow worried that the US ABM system would weaken the Soviet nuclear deterrent. In the end, two issues were linked, and both sides bundled "limitations on offensive weapons" (the interim SALT I agreement) together with "limitations on anti-ballistic missiles" (the ABM Treaty) into a single package deal.

In studying sequencing strategies in international peace negotiations, many have focused on the gradualist approach of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the Middle East, where the parties in an intractable conflict start with the easier issues and gradually move to the more difficult topics. This has been the approach taken in, at the very least, by the US vis-a-vis China in proposing confidence-building measures aimed at reducing risk without restraining China in its capability development or deployment (e.g., launch notification mechanism). The disadvantage to the gradualist approach is that the slow-moving process gives spoilers free play to destroy trust, and it will eventually undermine the support from the engagers and unravel any trust that has been gained.[56] This has arguably happened in the US-China dialogue space. For example, after 15 years of the Track 1.5 dialogue organised in Beijing and Hawaii, it was suspended in 2019 due to loss of momentum[57]—the US blamed the Chinese for

not progressing towards an official nuclear dialogue, and the Chinese side blamed the Trump Administration for poisoning the overall bilateral relationship.[58]

However, a gradualist approach is not the only one. Rather than starting small, one could also tackle the most difficult issue first (the "boulder on the road" approach), or negotiating all issues at once but in parallel working groups.[59] Adopting the "boulder on the road" strategy might in this case mean discussing a grand nuclear bargain, or talking about denuclearisation, or a big-for-big trade-off across security issues (e.g. Chinese INF-range missile reductions in exchange for limitation of US deployment of INF-range missiles and missile defense systems in Asia). The latter approach, using parallel working groups, would in turn be suited for negotiating parallel but linked issues such as nuclear modernisation and expansion in one group and emerging technologies and missile defense in other groups. Another approach to consider is the "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed" concept, whereby all issues remain on the table until all aspects are agreed. This approach would allow for parallel negotiations on issues that might be strategically linked, such as nuclear agreements and limitations on missile defense systems. Lastly, and in contrast, one could also conceive of a sequencing of smaller pre-agreed steps (a roadmap) towards a grand bargain-like framework of agreements, whereby each side takes smaller steps and only moves forward to the next phase once they have verified the reciprocity of the other side(s). The approaches and examples mentioned here are not exhaustive but merit a more in-depth debate.

Diplomatic Orchestration

In addition to considering the sequencing of efforts over time and across diverse geographic settings, it is also important to examine the interplay and complementarity of different diplomatic tracks, adopting a "systems approach"[60] that spans Track 1, Track 1.5, and Track 2 dialogues. Each of these tracks offers distinct advantages and challenges. Track 2 presents an opportunity for greater experimentation and the incubation of ideas, and it fosters trust-building and the development of a shared understanding and vocabulary. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Track 2 participants, while instrumental in shaping ideas, are generally not decision-makers. As the Beijing-Hawaii Track 1.5 demonstrated, the functionality of that dialogue space eventually withered as no ideas were transferred to a (sustained) Track 1 dialogue. This transfer of ideas and momentum between the Track 1.5 and Track 2 spaces is essential in peace processes, yet it has proven to be a persistent challenge, particularly in the context of US-China relations. Having Track 2 participants with close links to officials might help the transfer of ideas but is likely to constrain them in thinking beyond entrenched positions.[61]

While Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues have been widely employed in the realms of arms control and non-proliferation, their creative potential and flexible format may not have been fully realised. A third-party facilitator or mediator in the Track 1.5/2 space might allow participants to move beyond entrenched positions. Track 2 also offers a valuable platform to bring in participants with more diverse backgrounds and to explore the intersectionality between nuclear issues and related domains, providing an opportunity for cross-disciplinary engagement. There is also a need for officials on all sides to recognise the value of sustained Track 1.5 and Track 2 engagement, including the potential to direct or mandate Track 2 participants to address specific issues, contribute to process design, conduct tabletop exercises, and other related activities.

Inclusivity

Lastly, it should also be debated whether the future strategic stability framework is to be decided by US, China and Russia as main actors. Drawing a parallel to peace processes, there is always the question about inclusivity and how to draw on and represent the perspectives of those not in power or holding weapons. Drawing on the issue of inclusivity in peace processes, it might lead to a more durable outcome[62] but with the risk of fragmenting and pro-longing or overcomplicating the process.[63] In the context of strategic stability, one could ask whether there could be a role for non-nuclear weapon states with a convening and agenda-setting influence or regional nuclear weapon states such as India, France, etc. For example, some European countries currently hold Track 1 and Track 2 dialogues with China on arms control and non-proliferation and could use these channels to test the waters on some confidence-building measures. Having a minilateral or multilateral group of countries support the efforts of the US, China, and Russia might create more legitimacy and could play a role in any framework that includes issue linkage with regional security. Their involvement might also be necessary in issues that transcend the nuclear domain, e.g., on emerging technologies. Secondly, it should be considered how to include the views, through consultative processes, of private sector companies regarding technological advancements, the integration of emerging technologies into military capabilities, and their impact on arms control.

In summary, drawing on case studies and research from the field of peace process mediation could help reinvigorate the debate on process design within the arms control community. While this paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive overview or prescribe a specific direction for this debate, it seeks to highlight key factors worth considering.

Conclusion

The classical school of arms control theory, which effectively explains and guided US-Soviet arms control practices during the Cold War, is becoming increasingly less relevant as the international system evolves into a more complex, multipolar structure, with China playing a larger role. The reformist school has overemphasised emerging threats such as proliferation and terrorism and has thus far not addressed the return of major-power rivalry in the 2010s. Recent scholarship has started to address the impact of emerging and disruptive technologies on strategic stability. Furthermore, there are myriad challenges in diplomatic efforts to address the great-power rivalry and the onset of a new arms race. Even at the most foundational level, bilateral diplomacy between the largest nuclear powers is stuck. There is a need to move beyond the old paradigm of the Cold War and discuss the re-imagining of a multi-track process approach.

This paper did not prescribe a magic formula or a roadmap for a future strategic stability framework or arms control agreements in a multipolar world. However, it was intended to highlight the need for an academic and expert debate on process design for strategic stability negotiations. Promoting a scholarly and think tank debate on possible roadmaps to a negotiated agreement will also help policymakers on each side. Even if the outcomes of future negotiated agreements remain unknown, encouraging scholars to hear the full breadth of options might debunk group thinking in Beijing that arms

control only serves to constrain China into a position of complete weakness vis-à-vis the United States. Similarly, exploring a wide range of frameworks could dispel entrenched assumptions in the White House that strategic stability can only be preserved through overwhelming deterrence, which might open space for more flexible approaches to arms control—ones that do not automatically equate restraint with vulnerability. At the same time, weighing the full spectrum of proposals may erode the prevailing narrative in the Kremlin that arms control is merely a Western tactic to undermine Russia's strategic parity, which could invite a more pragmatic discussion about mutual security interests in an evolving multipolar order.

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