

unconstrained by negotiated treaties, have raised fears about the collapse of the current arms control regimes and contributed to renewed interest in trying to elaborate a new strategic framework.<sup>49</sup> With the end of the Cold War and bipolarity, the US has regarded WMD proliferation and use by "states of concern" as the greatest threat to the security of its homeland and expeditionary forces – following the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the number of US forces deployed in non-traditional theatres has been and remains the highest in its history. In contrast, the European allies regard the degrading post-Soviet WMD capabilities of Russia as a major potential risk, while Japan is concerned about China's rising power, and both Japan and South Korea fear North Korea's nuclear and missile potential. Furthermore, since the US has emerged as the sole surviving superpower, there is a growing debate on the longevity and stability of a unipolar system.

Thus, there is no shortage of material discussing the concept of strategic stability in its various formulations. This brief paper will attempt to clarify the meaning and context of strategic stability in the current context as well as in the emerging international security environment.

### Strategic Stability During the Cold War

Ever since the US lost its nuclear weapons monopoly in 1949, the quest for strategic stability has been the central organizing principle of its nuclear strategy and arms control policy.<sup>50</sup> US policymakers traditionally viewed overall stability as based on a duality of crisis stability and arms race stability. The nominal definition of crisis stability was a lack of incentives for initiating a nuclear attack. In other words, a condition under which neither superpower felt pressured to resort to pre-emptive nuclear war to resolve a crisis situation. Furthermore, it was essential to maintain stability not only during crises but at all times and to prevent a "bolt out of the blue" nuclear attack – hence, first-strike stability came about and was captured structurally in the concept of "mutual assured destruction". This required a preoccupation with numbers, technical characteristics, and operational considerations. Stability rested on the survivability of strategic offensive forces and on the lack of a decapitation capability – i.e. that nuclear forces must be survivable to resist "use them, or lose them" pressure, yet not be capable of taking out the adversary's retaliatory forces in a disarming first strike. This led to the US and the USSR each developing and deploying very large numbers of nuclear weapons on permanent high-alert and capable of inflicting unacceptable damage on the adversary – this was quantified as a capability for destroying 50 percent or more of military, leadership, and industrial targets.

The strategic arms control agreements of the late 1960s and early 1970s – SALT I and II, and the ABM – were designed to preserve arms race stability – thus stabilizing the central strategic balance and by extension the East-West relationship. It was believed that such central stability would result in a safer world based on a negotiated codification of nuclear arms control conflating a relationship of mutual vulnerability to second strike retaliation, and essential equivalence-parity in overall offensive nuclear

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example: George W. Bush, "New Leadership on National Security," speech on May 23, 2000; President George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University," on May 1, 2001; testimony by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to the US Senate Armed Services Committee, on June 21, 2001; *Administration Missile Defense Papers* on-line at [www.ceip.org/npp](http://www.ceip.org/npp); and President Vladimir Putin, "Address to the Millennium Summit," on September 6, 2000; and President Jacques Chirac, "Speech to the Institute of Higher National Defence Studies," on June 8, 2001.

<sup>50</sup> See, John D. Steinbrunner, "National Security and the Concept of Strategic Stability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (September 1978), p. 413.