

strategic arsenal. From this follows the collapse of the next cornerstone. With the major nuclear powers having failed to meet their obligations under Article VI, adherents to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) begin to withdraw, leading to the collapse of the Treaty. With the bilateral arms control process destroyed, two of the major nuclear powers increasing their strategic arsenals, and the NPT in ruins, the final cornerstone, the remnants of the remaining components of the multilateral non-proliferation regime, disintegrate as well.

Thus, the interpretation of the missile defence-ABM Treaty as *a* cornerstone sets in motion a process resulting in a strategically unstable world. From *the* interpretation, the process set in motion is equivalent to instability. In either case, however, the meaning of strategic stability is no longer the **apolitical** Cold War idea of a condition of invulnerable assured destruction second strike forces within an environment of political hostility. Instead, the new meaning of strategic stability is political. It is still about strategic weapon systems (warheads and delivery systems) and arms control/non-proliferation designed to manage them. But, it is also about their causal impact on the state of global relations.

In one sense, stability becomes defined as the absence of the political conditions, which increase the likelihood of systemic war. In so doing, their absence is directly related to the existence of a web of international (bilateral and multilateral) agreements managing weapons, strategic and otherwise. In effect, the stable equilibrium point for the strategic system is this web of international agreements, which is synonymous with a low probability of major war. Thus, instability is either conceived as the death of one vital arms control agreement, signaling movement away from the equilibrium point, or the process whose end result is significant instability. In both cases, the net result is a much more dangerous world.

Central to this view of strategic stability is the prospects for nuclear disarmament. If one focuses directly upon this as key to the re-definition, strategic stability has truly been turned on its head. In addition, the role and function of arms control has also significantly changed, relative to strategic stability. Traditionally, the purpose of arms control in maintaining strategic stability, and thus international security, was to manage and codify the *balance of nuclear terror*. It had nothing to do with nuclear disarmament. In fact, its function was to perpetuate international security based upon deterrence stability reflected in the condition of mutual assured destruction. In the new conceptualization, arms control is part of a process towards the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament.

The new meaning reflects a longstanding debate about the relationship between weapons, agreements and political relations, as reflected in the aforementioned alternative views of the role and function of arms control. Arms related agreements are conceptualized not as independent of politics per se, but as an independent causal agent that directly affects the state of political relations— the confidence-building idea. They are much more than just indicators or symbols, as suggested in the idea of the arms control paradox (i.e. when you need arms control because hostility is great, you can't get it, and when you don't need arms control because relations are relatively good, you can get all you want and more).

The causal relationship between weapons and the state of political relations within a redefined strategic stability concept basically represents the belief that military capabilities are the best indicator of intent. Developing and deploying missile defences indicates that a state is expecting that a relationship will become politically unstable, and is preparing a military strategy to deal with it, or at least this is how the action is perceived by others. For example, missile defences are being prepared for that time in which the US and China become hostile political adversaries. Thus, missile defences feed into a specific set of beliefs or expectations about one possible future, and in so doing, the outcome, as confirmed by missile defence, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Missile defence is not the single cause of political instability. It confirms the likelihood of one possible future over another.