

Steven Pifer on the China-U.S.-Russia Triangle and Strategy on Nuclear Arms Control

(approximate reconstruction of Pifer's July 13 talk)

Nuclear arms control has long been thought of in bilateral terms, between the United States and Soviet Union, and then between the United States and Russia. We could do this in part because China deployed its nuclear forces at a modest pace.

Increasingly, however, we should think about nuclear weapons and related issues in broader terms, including in the U.S.-China-Russia context. I will look at three questions. First, how the bilateral strategic stability model is evolving into a multilateral, multi-domain model. Second, the U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control regime and how China might be engaged, as well as the question of the possible collapse of that arms control regime. Third, the challenge to the United States, China and Russia posed by North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Strategic Stability Model

Stability traditionally has been defined as a situation in which neither side, even in an intense crisis, has an incentive to strike first with nuclear weapons, because it recognizes that the other would still retain the capability to inflict a devastating retaliatory strike. Strategic stability traditionally has been seen as a U.S.-Soviet or U.S.-Russian concept, based on numbers of strategic offensive forces. As both sides had secure second strike capabilities, neither had an incentive to strike first. The concept was well understood in both Washington and Moscow.

It has been more difficult to define strategic stability between the United States and China, or between Russia and China. As Chinese experts have noted, the model is not very appropriate given the large disparities in nuclear forces between the sides. That said, most in the United States would say that China has a secure second strike capability. In any case, it is time to develop a new stability model, one that addresses issues such as missile defense, precision-guided conventional strike, third-country nuclear forces and new domains such as space and cyber.

As an example, take the question of U.S. missile defense against North Korea. As North Korea develops its ballistic missile capabilities, the United States looks to missile defense—both the THAAD system in South Korea and ground-based interceptors in Alaska and California. Increasing U.S. missile defense capabilities raise concern in China. One challenge for the United States is how to balance the requirement for missile defense against North Korea with the desire not to provoke Chinese concern and an increase in the number of Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Another issue is the impact of precision-guided conventional strike systems on the nuclear balance. This seems to be causing concern in Russia and China. There is also the question of new domains, such as space and cyber.

As a result of all this, the strategic stability model should evolve from a bilateral U.S.-Russia model to a multilateral, multi-domain model. That will be far more complex. We need to think through what can be done to strengthen stability in this model, and how to avoid increasing instability. The United States, China and Russia should have an interest in getting this right.

The U.S.-Russia Nuclear Arms Control Regime

We have had nearly 50 years of nuclear arms control between Washington and Moscow, which has been good for the security of both countries, and for global security and stability. The question is: what next?

I would like to see another round of U.S. and Russian nuclear reductions going beyond those required by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). That would be a negotiation that would cover all U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons—strategic and non-strategic, deployed and non-deployed.

The Russians, however, have refused to take part in another bilateral U.S.-Russian negotiating round but instead call for a multilateral negotiation, which presumably would include at least Britain, France and China. Although Russian officials have proposed a multilateral negotiation, they have not suggested how an agreement would be structured. Equal limits on all five countries would either require drastic U.S. and Russian reductions or allow Britain, France and China to build up. Beijing, Paris and London likely would not be prepared to agree to a treaty with unequal limits.

My suggestion would be for the United States and Russia to conclude a treaty requiring significant reductions in their total numbers of nuclear weapons and, in that context, to ask Britain, France and China to make unilateral political commitments not to increase the number of their nuclear weapons as long as the United States and Russia were reducing. That could offer a way forward.

But now, I instead fear that the existing U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control regime is at risk. The most urgent problem is the fate of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty. That treaty, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, banned all U.S. and Soviet ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5500 kilometers. The treaty resulted in the elimination of some 2700 missiles.

About ten years ago, however, Russian officials began to express concern about the treaty. They noted that, while the treaty prohibits Russia and the United States from having intermediate-range missiles, third countries could develop and possess them. North Korea, South Korea, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel had

intermediate-range missile programs. All those countries have one thing in common: they are much closer to Russia than to the United States.

I do not believe that the Russian concern was well-founded. Given the large number of Russian strategic nuclear, other nuclear and conventional forces, Russia has no need of matching third countries in intermediate-range missiles.

Moscow, however, apparently reached a different conclusion. The Russians have violated the treaty by deploying an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile. The Russians deny that and charge the United States with three violations of the treaty, one of which may have some merit.

With political will in Washington and Moscow, it would be possible to resolve the concerns and bring the sides back into full compliance with the treaty. But Russia apparently sees the costs of violating the treaty as less than the treaty's security benefits.

The Trump administration is reviewing the situation, and it is unclear where it will come out. Some in the administration talk about finding leverage, suggesting that they may be thinking of ways to encourage Russia to come back into compliance. Congressional Republicans want the United States to build an intermediate-range missile. However, there is no funding planned in the Defense Department's budget for such a missile, and NATO, Japan and South Korea likely would not agree to host it. An intermediate-range missile based in the United States would not concern the Russians.

I worry that the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty is in danger. I am surprised that there is no diplomatic protest or outcry in Europe, Japan, South Korea or China. The Russian intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile cannot reach the United States. It was designed, built and deployed to target countries in Europe and Asia, including China.

It would be worthwhile to preserve the treaty and its security benefits, but that may not be possible.

The second challenge to the U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control regime is the fate of the New START Treaty. The treaty's limits take effect in February 2018. The U.S. military is on track to meet that deadline, and U.S. officials believe that Russia will also meet it. I believe that the United States will observe the New START Treaty until 2021, when by its terms the treaty will expire.

The question is: will U.S. and Russian officials agree to extend the treaty, which they can do, by up to five years, that is, to 2026? The U.S. military likely would support that, but it is not clear where the Trump administration as a whole will come down. If Russia is continuing to violate the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, or if that treaty has collapsed, it could be politically difficult for the Trump administration to extend New START.

If the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty collapses and if the New START Treaty is not extended and expires in 2021, that would mean that, for the first time in nearly 50 years, there would be no negotiated limits constraining U.S. and Russian nuclear forces. That would have negative consequences for both the United States and Russia.

First, the sides would lose the transparency provided by New START, which requires the two countries to exchange a significant amount of data every six months and exchange thousands of notifications regarding their strategic forces each year. The treaty also allows each to conduct up to 18 inspections per year of the other side's strategic forces.

Second, the caps on each side's nuclear forces would be lost. That might not lead automatically to an arms race between the two countries, but neither side would be constrained.

Third, what would be the effect on the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the non-nuclear weapons states if U.S. and Russian nuclear forces were no longer limited? And how would China react? I assume that one reason why China's nuclear build-up has proceeded at a modest pace is because of the limits on U.S. and Russian nuclear forces. How would China react if those limits disappear?

I very much hope that the United States and Russia can preserve the nuclear arms control regime, but I am not sure that they will.

Dealing with North Korea

The United States, China and Russia should share an interest in a denuclearized Korean Peninsula and avoiding conflict there. It is clear, however, that the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" did not work; North Korea continued to test nuclear weapons and longer-range ballistic missiles.

The Trump administration has said that it will not tolerate a permanently nuclear-armed North Korea. It has also said that it would not tolerate a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile. Yet it is not clear what the Trump administration means by not tolerate. The North Korean test on July 4 was of a missile that, flown on a normal ballistic trajectory, would have gone further than 5500 kilometers—the definition of an intercontinental ballistic missile.

The Trump administration is grappling with this now. When Presidents Trump and Xi met in Florida, they discussed tighter Chinese sanctions on North Korea. But that does not seem to have had an impact on North Korea.

At the same time, Secretary Tillerson has tried to assure North Korea, stating that U.S. policy does not aim at regime change and does not seek early reunification. Those comments were also aimed at assuring China.

The question now is how to change North Korea's cost/benefit calculation. There likely will be a push in the United States for more pressure on North Korea. That

could take the form of more sanctions, perhaps including secondary sanctions on companies doing business with North Korea, more robust U.S.-South Korean military exercises and more missile defense.

As for the military option, Secretary Mattis has made clear just how ugly that could be. It could provoke all-out war on the Korean Peninsula.

One idea has been discussed in the non-governmental arms control community in the United States. It would entail greater sanctions, with a focus on China, and a resumed negotiation, in which there could be a U.S.-North Korean channel embedded in a multilateral dialogue, likely a revived six-party format.

In the negotiation, a denuclearized Korean Peninsula would remain the ultimate goal, but the interim objective would be a freeze on North Korean nuclear tests, long-range ballistic missile tests and production of nuclear materials. The United States likely would have to give something to get this, which might include a reduction in the scale of military exercises.

I would note that some in Washington are dubious about this idea. They ask why the United States should give anything to get North Korea to abide by the requirements of UN Security Council resolutions. They also express concern that the freeze would become permanent, that full denuclearization might never be achieved. That risk has to be acknowledged, but the alternative may be that North Korea further increases its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities.

Even if the United States tried this approach, the expectations for success should be modest. But it is not clear that the Trump administration is prepared to try this.

That said, pressure in the United States to “do something” is growing. Missile defense likely will be part of the answer, even though that could be problematic for China.

My own view is that, if North Korea gets a nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile and considers launching it at Seattle in a U.S.-North Korean crisis, missile defense might have some impact on Mr. Kim’s calculation. But the far larger impact—and what would likely keep him from launching the missile—would be the certainty that two or three hours after his missile struck Seattle, his regime would be utterly obliterated.

That is not necessarily a widely held view in Washington. Americans accept the fact that the United States is vulnerable to a Russian missile attack. Many in the U.S. government also recognize that the United States is vulnerable to China, though U.S. officials do not formally admit that for domestic political and allied assurance reasons. But few are prepared to accept vulnerability to a North Korean missile attack.

Thus, as North Korea makes more progress on nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, there will be growing pressure in the United States for more missile defense and perhaps for positioning more military force closer to the Korean Peninsula. Some

might even suggest that Washington change its policy from seeking a change in North Korean policy to a change of the North Korean regime. I'm not an expert on North Korea, but I am not sure the United States has the wisdom or tools to accomplish that.

I wish there was a good solution for the North Korean challenge. It is a problem that the United States, China and Russia need to work on. I can understand that China's main goal is to avoid instability; it does not wish to have chaos on its border or face a flood of North Korean refugees. But I am not sure that the current course of developments will avoid that. This should be a subject of cooperation among the United States, China and Russia, as well as South Korea and Japan.

Conclusion

Nuclear weapons and nuclear arms control pose some big questions for the United States, China and Russia. There is value in the three working together to address those questions. But they are complicated issues, and the challenges will not be easily managed.