



STRATCOM Deterrence Remarks

Elbridge Colby

Robert M. Gates Fellow, Center for a New American Security

August 13, 2014

Can we transition from a world characterized by “mutual assured destruction,” or MAD, to one of “mutual assured stability”?

Let me be more precise. MAD was a force planning doctrine from the Cold War that dictated that stability would ensue if each side in the great standoff could reliably destroy a certain fraction of the other side’s country even in the event the other side attacked first. This is something of an historical artifact.

I think what we are really talking about here is the broader idea of strategic stability. To my knowledge, the U.S. Government has never offered an official definition of “strategic stability.” But I think in common parlance it’s taken to mean that stability, at least among the major powers, ultimately stems from some recognition that each of the great nations can threaten the other with searing pain under any plausible circumstance, and thus that there is a common interest in finding ways to limit the possibility of this happening. The concept recognizes that great war remains possible but seeks to exploit that possibility to encourage peace. It especially uses the unique threat of destruction that nuclear weapons pose to chill the impetus towards aggression and violence by making great war so clearly terrible as to be manifestly unreasonable. It thus makes a virtue of necessity.

The other idea, of “mutual assured stability,” is a more recent formulation. The closest thing we have to an official statement, as far as I understand, is from the International Security Advisory Board of the State Department, which was asked to look into the concept and produced a report on it in 2012. The ISAB described a situation of mutual assured stability as deriving from “a relationship among nations...in which nuclear weapons are no longer a central feature of their security; deterrence based on nuclear destruction is no longer necessary, and the likelihood of nuclear war is treated as remote because their relationship is free of major, core security issues...and the benefits from peaceful integration...provide a counterbalance to the perceived advantages of nuclear conflict.” I commend the ISAB for the way they stated the idea of MAS, because I think this understanding is a reasonable one (if the concept is to be innovative) and at the same time it sets up precisely the right debate about whether the legacy idea of strategic stability should be jettisoned in favor of MAS.

The real crux of this debate is whether international stability based ultimately on the threat of force – and not just any force, but the most terrible and devastating kind – can be fully and reliably replaced by a stability resting on common pursuit of shared positive interests. Of course the concept of strategic stability does not suggest that stability must derive wholly or even primarily from such a threat. In fact, part of the appeal of strategic stability is that it promises to lessen the military dimension in international relations by making it clear how perilous major war is, and thus also enables and opens space for peaceful cooperation. But it does entail that such a threat is *fundamental* and even *foundational* to a real stability – that the threat of devastation if one is seriously attacked is always lurking. Foundational doesn't mean in the front of our minds all the time – but it does mean it's always there, forming the often implicit context for our actions. The concept of MAS, on the other hand, seeks to displace this model based ultimately on the threat of violence and aims to shift relations among the major nations to ones entirely free of even the implicit threat of fierce coercion.

What we are really asking, then, is whether the threat of major war and ultimately of serious force can be wholly eliminated from international politics. If it can, then the pursuit of strategic stability is a false and misleading idol, and the permanent existence of nuclear weapons unjustified since they unnecessarily introduce the ever-present possibility that they might be used.

But can the threat of major force really be extirpated from the international arena? It would be too flippant, if perhaps justified, merely to point to what is happening in Ukraine, the East and South China Seas, and the broader Middle East to suggest that the possibility is too remote to be seriously entertained.

So let us look at the strongest versions of the argument that war can be banished, offered for instance by Professor Robert Jervis of Columbia and Dr. Bruno Tertrais of FRS in Paris, two of the world's finest strategic minds. These arguments tend to focus on two basic propositions: that humanity has moved or can move beyond war and that war no longer pays.

I think both of these claims have merit but that they are both ultimately wrong and certainly imprudent. I think the threat of force and war is inherent in international politics and thus that relying on the most effective form of deterrence – nuclear weapons – is the wisest course for us to pursue. Let me explain why.

Let me start with the narrower claim – that war no longer pays. This argument states that, in a world of increasing returns to trade and seriously diminished returns to conquest, military

aggression leaves one in the red, not the black. There is a lot of truth in this. But it doesn't mean that we are on the road to perpetual peace. There are a few reasons why. First, in a world that doesn't reflect the aspirations of neo-classical economics, coercion and aggression still can pay under a lot of circumstances; Saudi Arabia and Kuwait surely benefit from their huge and tempting oil fields. Moreover, people can *think* that war can still pay – just ask the Saddam Hussein of 1990. People might prefer to be better off than their neighbor, even if it is not as desirable as a theoretical world of total peace and unfettered trade that is highly unlikely to materialize. Second and perhaps more importantly, many – if not most – wars have not come about for strictly material gain. The structure and nature of international politics, honor, pride, ambition, fear, and the desire to dominate are all familiar culprits in the history of war and violence. It is worth recalling that seizing Crimea was a losing proposition financially for Mosco.

This latter point leads to the broader and more fundamental argument that some offer for why major war can be made a thing of the past – that humanity can move beyond a politics that rests on the threat of force. In a sense, it is an argument that humanity can fundamentally change – that we can move from being the fearful rationalists of Thomas Hobbes and the violent post-apes of evolutionary biology to being something fundamentally different – people who simply will not resort to at least large-scale violence. This argument, which the ISAB echoes, asserts that the progress of learning, of democracy and free trade, the softening and mellowing of social mores, the declining tolerance for the costs and risks of war, and the development of “norms” and “taboos” can create a self-sustaining and self-propagating community of nations among which resort to force and thus war are simply unthinkable. Needless to say, a world in which war is simply unimaginable is also one in which strategic stability and nuclear weapons would be unnecessary.

Clearly there is a lot here – attitudes have changed and wars, and especially major wars, have manifestly declined in frequency. And proponents of this view are quick to note that this situation does not yet characterize the world as a whole. But they do argue that it is a realistic possibility, and particularly point to Europe as an example of how nations can turn from grasping for each other's throats to engaging in the tightest forms of cooperation.

But I do not think that this means we can conclude that violence and war can be cleansed from international politics. Why? Because to my eye the threat of force and thus war is endemic to human life. It is an inherent capability for beings who can readily kill and hurt and who can easily be killed and hurt. And human history and everyday experience indicate that if violence will lead to gain, many will resort to it, and unless countered will often prove materially the better



off for doing so. The option to violence thus must be confronted and accounted for rather than ignored.

But don't take it from me. Look around you – even our domestic societies are totally encompassed within the threat of force. Policemen carry or can readily access weapons, the judicial system coerces those judged guilty into prison, and ultimately the government possesses a total supremacy in the use of organized violence in its armed forces. Why should we expect international life, which is mostly bereft of the social compacts we enjoy in the domestic sphere, to be free of the forms of latent violence we accept as given within our borders?

But what are we to make of Europe, then? Does it prove that humanity can transcend war entirely? I think not. Europe's post-1945 internal peace ultimately was a product of the fact that the individual European states were priced out of the strategic market more than of a change in European attitudes (though this played a role, to be sure). Europe's traditional internecine fights became pointless, exceptionally difficult to mount, unnecessary, and unattractive. Indeed, the awareness of this fact formed much of the drive for European integration. And so strategic competition was displaced first to the inner-German border and now to the boundaries of NATO. Thus saying that post-1945 intra-European peace demonstrates that humanity can get beyond war is a bit like saying that the fact that Yankees and Southerners haven't fought since 1865 proves it.

Nor should we take Europe's progress as necessarily unidirectional, given the grave challenges to cementing European integration and stability we see in the Euro Crisis, the ascendancy of an increasingly independent Germany, movements towards autonomy among some EU states like the United Kingdom, efforts towards regional secession in Scotland and Catalonia, and resentment in Europe's southern echelon. We should not take it as a given that the possibility of coercion and force are impossible even within contemporary Europe.

Further, we should bear in mind that Europe might be the exception rather than the rule. It is clear that Europeans have become more pacifist. But they aren't the first peoples in history to do so. And just because they have become less aggressive and belligerent doesn't mean others will too. One who visits Asia or the Middle East is immediately struck by the fundamental difference in attitudes one finds there in comparison to Europe. Why should we suppose that the Europeans are the vanguard of the future rather than simply in decline? Their economies have slowed considerably, their demographic futures are gray (literally), and their international influence is shrinking (certainly beyond Germany). Indeed, over the longer term, their very lack of strategic



vigor may inspire greater aggressiveness from others more “hungry,” a dynamic which has a long historical lineage.

I dwell on Europe, for which I have the greatest affection, not to pick at its wounds but to try to persuade you that we should not be deluded into thinking that a world without the real possibility of force, war, and fear is a realistic objective. It is certainly a worthy hope, but hope alone, as the saying goes, is a poor basis for policy. Rather, we should stick to the more incremental but still – when looked at it with the long view – remarkable progress that we have been able to make with the more modest goal of strategic stability.

So rather than replacing the concept of “strategic stability,” I think we should refine and more fully implement it. Here is my proposal for a definition: that a situation is stable when “*nations would only use nuclear weapons to vindicate their vital interests in extreme circumstances*” – in effect, a situation in which nuclear arms would only be employed for essentially “political” and basically defensive purposes, capturing the benefits of the nuclear revolution while minimizing its unnecessarily perilous aspects. (I’d be happy to discuss this proposed definition and its implications further during the discussion.)

Every reasonable effort to encourage peace and positive relations among peoples should be encouraged. But at the same time it must always be remembered – and when forgotten recalled, if necessary vehemently – that violence and war are always thinkable. They therefore must be shown to be foolish or too dangerous to be resorted to rather than ignored or hoped away. It is thus only through the threat of violence that we can really hope to prevent violence. And the surest way we have seen to do this is through exploiting the uniquely terrible power of nuclear weapons in a way that conduces to stability.

This message is not necessarily uplifting or fashionable, but it is serious – and certainly essential. I therefore hope that those entrusted now and in the future with leading our strategic forces and forming our strategic policy – like so many of you here – will not be shy in reminding those who would forget these realities that they cannot be escaped but must be lived with and made the best of. In an imperfect world, that is a worthy goal – and hard enough.

Thank you very much.