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## The Geopolitics of Strategic Stability: Looking Beyond Cold Warriors and Nuclear Weapons

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## CHAPTER 3

### THE GEOPOLITICS OF STRATEGIC STABILITY: LOOKING BEYOND COLD WARRIORS AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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Colin S. Gray

“Strategic stability” is a much-used, but under-analyzed, term. Before launching into any discussion of strategic stability in this century, it is necessary first to ask what we actually *mean* by strategic stability. Game theorists endeavor to define the phrase in very precise mathematical terms, but even among these specialists there is no settled agreement on its proper definition.<sup>1</sup> In policy debates, meanwhile, the term is used very loosely to describe anything from rough parity in the sizes of nuclear arsenals to the perceived unlikelihood of an acute political crisis.

The argument herein will hinge on the distinction between what will be called “weapons-oriented” and “holistic” conceptions of strategic stability. The former is flawed because of its narrowness, but the latter may play a useful role in policy debate. While the material military balance may be an important—sometimes even the most important—factor in keeping the peace between two particular states, *context is sovereign*. It is only when one considers weaponry in its broader political context that one can assess its role in maintaining stability accurately.

## WEAPONS AND STRATEGIC STABILITY

Weapons-oriented analyses of strategic stability focus on how fluctuations in the balance of military power may impact the likelihood of war. In particular, issues such as the increase or decrease in the number of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, the potential vulnerability of nuclear forces, appropriate basing modes and doctrine, and the deployment (or nondeployment) and character of anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems, have tended to be at the center of debate. This was particularly characteristic of the Cold War era, when most of the strategic literature concentrated obsessively on U.S.-Soviet competition in the nuclear realm.<sup>2</sup> Given the Cold War political context, one of the authors of this chapter noted over 30 years ago that “discussion of stability and its possible requirements is, in fact, a discussion of deterrence theory, which in reality is a debate about the operational merits of different postures and doctrines. No useful, objective, doctrine-neutral exploration of the idea of stability is possible.”<sup>3</sup> The U.S. debate over stability – regardless of whether “arms-race,” “crisis,” or “strategic” was the chosen modifying adjective – was, at its core, an argument about how to “do” nuclear deterrence successfully.

The then-prevailing focus on nuclear armament was understandable, but overly restricted. To be sure, both superpowers focused acutely on the quality and quantity of their arsenals. However, it should be remembered that the Soviet-American relationship never was *defined* by nuclear weapons – the latter were merely tools that each superpower, profoundly mistrustful of its peer, accumulated in great quantity. The deeper reasons for the mistrust were ideological,

historical, and geopolitical in character: nuclear weapons did not cause the Cold War any more than tanks and aircraft carriers caused World War II. Each of the superpowers simply put together what it considered a sensible military toolkit for the deterrence, and if necessary fighting, of a world war. Given the destructive power of nuclear weapons, it was entirely understandable that they would stand out from supposedly “normal” conventional weapons. However, the concept of deterrence itself was not new—to modify and adapt Clausewitz, nuclear weapons changed the grammar of deterrence, not its character.<sup>4</sup>

Discussions of arsenal survivability, equality/parity of arsenals, and strategic stability were inherently entangled during the Cold War. However, as the struggle unfolded there was a subtle shift in how the United States discussed strategic stability. After the brief period of U.S. nuclear monopoly ended and as it became increasingly clear that the Soviet Union was intent on producing a sizable nuclear arsenal of its own, particular emphasis was placed on arsenal survivability, with the possibility of a Soviet surprise attack being a paramount concern.<sup>5</sup> However, as time passed, the U.S. arsenal became both larger and more technologically sophisticated (including, notably, ongoing improvements in command, control, and communications systems and in the accuracy of submarine-launched ballistic missiles), and concern that the United States would be unable to respond effectively to a first strike receded. At the same time, the increasing size and sophistication of the Soviet arsenal made it ever-clearer to Washington that a nuclear first strike on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) would be risky in the most extreme sense of the word.

The dynamic that dampened fears about survivability—the increase in the size and sophistication of nuclear arsenals—also had the effect of heightening concern that the purported nuclear arms race itself lessened strategic stability,<sup>6</sup> undermining efforts to build trust between the superpowers and encouraging a confrontational mindset on the part of U.S. and Soviet leaders. Interest in bilateral arms control increased: if uncontrolled nuclear competition seemed to be dangerous, it seemed to follow logically that limitations on the number and quality of nuclear arms would enhance strategic stability.

When the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) negotiations opened in 1969, the United States still maintained a clear advantage in the number of warheads deliverable at intercontinental range; Moscow, however, clearly was not willing to accept ongoing perceived inferiority in nuclear armaments. In this regard, the political-strategic logic of the process SALT negotiations was quite different from, say, the multilateral naval arms control process of the 1920s. The surrender of existing superiority might appear to make bilateral negotiations unattractive from an American perspective, and some hawkish policymakers resisted the realization of the SALT process. However, arms control proponents could argue, not unreasonably, that Moscow had a massive ongoing missile-building program and that, unless Washington either negotiated arms limits or greatly increased its own spending in this area, a Soviet Union, unencumbered by treaty, eventually might overtake the United States and establish nuclear superiority. Moreover, equality could be framed as an essential component of stability: if, despite efforts to build U.S.-Soviet trust through negotiation, a major crisis did occur, rough parity in over-

all nuclear capabilities might encourage restraint on both sides, as neither party would enjoy a significant advantage. This would underline the apparent incapability of mutual assured destruction (MAD), and thus discourage the outbreak of war.

The association of nuclear equality with stability in the U.S.-Russian relationship did not dissolve with the end of the Cold War. Indeed, two Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and II) were signed in the early 1990s, and both were predicated on the assumption that the United States and Russia would endeavor to maintain approximate parity in their strategic arsenals. In the 2000s, the George W. Bush administration came into office intending to sever the “numerical equality-strategic stability” link, but it soon signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) – and, overall, SORT was not radically dissimilar from earlier nuclear arms control treaties.<sup>7</sup> In the Barack Obama years, the previous administration’s modest deviation from arms control orthodoxy essentially was abandoned, as demonstrated by the text of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).<sup>8</sup>

When considering the development U.S.-Soviet/Russian arms control over the years from circa 1969 to the present, its most striking quality is its continuity. This is despite the fact that in the middle portion of this history, the fundamental character of the Washington-Moscow relationship changed as the Soviet empire in East-Central Europe, and then the USSR itself, collapsed. What had previously been an ideologically-driven competition between (at least seeming) peers had transformed into something entirely different. The cutthroat competition for global mastery had ended definitively.

These epic events allowed for an ironic reversal in the logic of Cold War arms control: now that American and Russian leaders both considered a central nuclear war very unlikely, agreement on truly drastic cuts in arsenals became possible. Rather than arms control shoring up a seemingly fragile peace, a peace that was seemed robust enabled more arms control. This underscores the limitations inherent in a militarily-focused, and, in the Cold War case, even more narrowly strategic nuclear-focused, vision of strategic stability. In some circumstances, the military balance may be a critical factor in specific decisions regarding war and peace, a theme explored below in greater detail. However, strategic stability is not only, or usually even primarily, a function of potential foes balancing the military component of national power. Rather, strategic stability reflects the overall condition of the international system — *and it can be very difficult to judge systemic stability accurately*. In 1988, the overwhelming majority of observers did not anticipate massive political instability in East-Central Europe in the following year; however, in autumn 1989 the fact that the strategic environment was profoundly unstable was obvious, given that momentous political changes were ongoing and the Soviet reaction to those changes was not safely predictable. Yet, of course, the U.S.-Soviet nuclear balance had not changed to any significant degree between 1988 and 1989.

This does not mean that decisions about the size and composition of nuclear arsenals, and the doctrine for nuclear use, inherently are trivial. Indeed, in certain political circumstances, the lives of tens, even hundreds, of millions may be placed at great risk if nuclear strategy is designed poorly. The Cold War era U.S. policymaking establishment's careful attention to

issues about nuclear weapons was entirely warranted, regardless of whether the prevailing judgment of the efficacy of bilateral arms control as an instrument for the maintenance of peace was flawed. However, in shaping the future discussion of strategic stability, one should keep in mind the deficiencies in a weapons-oriented vision of strategic stability. It is possible for the international system to be reasonably stable even when the military power of the leading polities is not particularly well-balanced; conversely, it is possible for the international system to be deeply unstable even when great powers (or alliances of great powers) appear closely matched militarily. The factors that determine whether war or peace will prevail are myriad, and an undue focus on weaponry sometimes may distract attention from more critical considerations.

In the 2 decades between 1969 and 1989, precise calculation of the minutia of nuclear arms control was the focus of obsessive attention. In retrospect, though, it appears unlikely that the throw-weight of SS-19 missiles or even the number of *Ohio*-class submarines deployed determined whether a Third World War occurred. Instead, whether peace prevailed probably was more an issue of the personality and values of individual leaders (most critically, Mikhail Gorbachev),<sup>9</sup> caution and generally sound judgment on the part of the George H. W. Bush administration, and simple good fortune. That combination worked well enough, but it is disconcerting to consider how, in contrast to massive effort devoted to arms control, relatively little intellectual energy occurred before 1989 to considering how best to ensure that the Soviet Union would not lash out militarily if its satellite empire began to collapse. Hopefully, in the years preceding the next great crisis in the international system, the United



States will have a clearer vision of likely forthcoming events, and already have developed a sophisticated, well-considered strategy for how to cope with them; after all, good luck is an occasional occurrence, not the foundation stone of grand strategy.

The United States is in need of a holistic conception of strategic stability in which calculations of relative military power are *only one component* in the overall strategic picture, and not necessarily the most important one. Military power is only one of the many factors that comprise a state's overall power, but which of those factors are key to strategic stability will vary according to political circumstances. Furthermore, when considering calculations of stability in the future, it is vital that we consider the strategic complications that accompany multipolarity.

## **A HOLISTIC VIEW OF STRATEGIC STABILITY AND INSTABILITY**

If a narrow focus on military power does not provide a satisfactory lens for addressing strategic stability, and constricted attention to nuclear arsenals in particular is excessively narrow, one is left with two general possibilities. The first is that strategic stability is so fundamentally flawed an idea that it should be discarded altogether. Given the difficulty in defining and assessing stability, it is tempting to do so. However, this chapter argues for a second possibility: that strategic stability is a concept that can be rescued, if it is used with an awareness of its problems and limitations.

Indeed, whatever its flaws, strategic stability is a necessary phrase insofar as it expresses something that is vital to the study of strategy: the notion that rela-

tionships among particular states vary over time, and there may be points in their relationship when war is a very real prospect. Moreover, there are periods when the international system as a whole is highly unstable. At such times great power war is unusually likely, particularly if the system is a dynamic multipolar one in which powers cannot feel secure in their position. *Strategic instability is a genuine circumstance, but a relative one* – there is, in practice, never a perfect strategic equilibrium, just as there is never perfect economic, environmental, or social stability. True strategic stability is a Platonic ideal, useful as a yardstick for judging real world conditions, but inherently unattainable as a policy goal. One can, however, seek to create a more stable bilateral relationship with a given country, or even a more stable overall international security environment, than the one that exists at present.

Rescuing strategic stability requires that we broaden the concept to reflect the myriad factors that impact political stability. There most assuredly have been historical periods in which relationships between polities have been particularly unstable, and this has implications for the likelihood of war. The conditions that might contribute to such instability are myriad – *social, economic, technological and other factors can create the conditions for international instability*, either brief or prolonged. If they are to reflect complex political reality, discussions of strategic stability must include such considerations.

The Europe of the early 16th century illustrates this point in a striking manner. The application of a mixture of seafaring technologies had allowed Columbus' voyages to the New World and Spain's establishment of colonies that offered a continuing income to the Spanish Crown, and, somewhat later, the ex-

appropriation of the awesome wealth of the Aztec and Incan Empires. In 1517, 2 years before the conquest of the Aztec Empire commenced, a theretofore minor German theologian composed, in Latin, a document challenging the sale of indulgences. The printing press already was widespread in Western and Central Europe by this point, and the subsequent translation of the *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* into German permitted what began as a theological controversy among clergy to become the catalyst for a mass movement.<sup>10</sup> This, of course, generally is treated as the beginning of what was to become known as the Protestant Reformation. Slightly over a decade later, both dynastic considerations (the desire to divorce an aging Queen Catherine, so as to permit marriage to a woman who might bear him a male heir) and, apparently, straightforward infatuation with the fetching Anne Boleyn, convinced Henry VIII—the one-time author of a book criticizing Martin Luther and Protestantism—to begin the process of separation from Rome.<sup>11</sup>

These factors, along with others too numerous to mention, created the conditions necessary for over a century of politico-religious warfare in which the House of Habsburg, particularly its Spanish line (the House effectively split into two branches in 1521), would bid unsuccessfully for European hegemony—an endeavor which France vehemently resisted;<sup>12</sup> France would suffer intermittent, sometimes crippling, religious civil war;<sup>13</sup> the Dutch Republic would both fight for independence from Habsburg control and establish itself as a leading economic power;<sup>14</sup> and the Thirty Years' War would devastate Central Europe, leaving much of Germany in ruin and millions dead.<sup>15</sup> The 1648 Peace of Westphalia represented a

more-or-less successful effort by an exhausted Europe to establish strategic stability and bring an end to a cycle of violence that was enormously costly to all the powers involved.

No single variable caused the 16th and early 17th centuries to unfold as they did; many factors converged to cause cataclysmic upheaval. Coincidence played a role, as it often does in history: Catholic Spain happened to begin receiving a massive influx of revenue during the same period in which the Protestant Reformation was taking hold, and that revenue would allow Spain to fight a seemingly endless series of wars against both Catholic and Protestant foes. Moreover, the Reformation itself was, at least to some degree, technology-dependent: in a Europe without large numbers of printing presses, and the resulting encouragement both of middle-class literacy and the free flow of ideas, the various religious strands that together comprised the Reformation might never have gained momentum. After all, over the centuries there had been numerous major heretical sects in Catholic Europe (and untold hundreds of minor ones) that ultimately were quashed, even though some managed to survive for decades or even centuries.

The Peace of Westphalia did not resolve many of the social issues that encouraged political violence in Europe—for instance, it was *after* Westphalia that the religion-fueled English Civil War entered perhaps its ugliest period, which included the execution of Charles I and Parliament's re-conquest of Ireland.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it certainly did not solve the "problem" of interstate warfare—indeed, the Franco-Spanish War, which started in 1635 as a component of the Thirty Years' War, continued until 1659. Nevertheless, the Peace did reflect the fact that European politics and

society had shifted decisively—it represented an implicit acknowledgement that Protestantism would endure permanently—and that the Habsburg bid for European hegemony had failed. Although it was not obvious in 1648, Spain had begun a permanent political decline from which it would never recover, while the eastern branch of the Habsburgs was compelled to accept that the position of Holy Roman Emperor would be much weakened, as power in the Empire would be even more decentralized than had previously been the case.

A *prerequisite* to the Peace of Westphalia, in short, was that certain conditions first had to improve; most critically, the intellectual “fever” driving the wars of religion on the Continent had to break, and Spanish power had to become less disproportionate to that of the other great powers. The rise of England, Sweden, and the Dutch Republic, France’s brutal settling of its internal religious discord, and Portugal’s decision in 1640 to sever itself from the Spanish crown—and the resulting war between Lisbon and Madrid—all aided in creating the latter. The meeting of these prerequisites, in turn, allowed the crafting of a Peace that would further encourage strategic stability.

The example of the Europe of the 16th and early 17th centuries starkly illustrates how varied and complex the factors are that determine international stability and how costly and enduring highly unstable conditions can be. Moreover, although the events in question are rather distant chronologically, religious discord and the use of new media to mobilize popular passions are themes that have more than a little resonance today. One key difference between the 16th century and more recent times, however, would appear to be the time which it takes for destabilizing factors to

converge, creating the conditions for major volatility. The stability of the 16th century multipolar European system degraded at, by today's standards, a leisurely pace. In the last couple of centuries, however, history has moved at a rapid clip – an understandable result of the interrelated trends of sharply increasing economic prosperity, speedy social change (and resulting instability), and the momentous increase in scientific knowledge and application of that knowledge to create new technologies or improve existing ones.<sup>17</sup> In considering the meaning of strategic stability for this century, it perhaps is useful also to consider an example drawn from an international system that already had been altered profoundly by the Industrial Revolution and all that attended it.

## **ASSESSING STRATEGIC STABILITY: THE CASE OF WORLD WAR I**

Strategic stability is an appealing notion in large part because it contains an underlying assumption that intelligent and well-meaning policymakers can *determine* when a relationship is becoming unstable and then act to correct that instability. This can be hazardous, as it may obscure how dangerous the international environment actually may be – and the illusion easily may incline policymakers to pursue a course of action that is overly bold, or even outright reckless.

The outbreak of World War I provides an excellent illustration of how difficult it is for contemporaries to judge systemic instability. Given that nearly a century has passed since mid-1914, we might reasonably claim to have enough historical distance from the event to enjoy at least some perspective on it. After all, we know how the rest of the 20th century turned out, for both

good and ill. Yet, we also have a staggering quantity of government documents, memoirs, and other materials produced by the participants themselves, as well as a huge secondary literature created by thousands of scholars. This is a rare combination: the world is far enough away from the war that it can be treated as “distant” history, as opposed to “contemporary” history, but the main combatants were recognizably modern states which left massive paper trails that in large part survived the conflict.

The most basic elements of the drama are well-known.<sup>18</sup> The two states anchoring the Central Powers at the time appeared to be in very different stages of their “imperial life cycles.” Austria-Hungary was a dignified but rather feeble multinational empire suffering from intense centrifugal forces fed by nationalism; somewhat paradoxically, Vienna believed that the solution to its problems might be found in further expansion into the Balkans.<sup>19</sup> The German Empire was youthful, vigorous, and dissatisfied with its global status, militarily confident but nonetheless concerned that the rapid growth of Russia’s population and economy soon would make it impossible to win a two-front war against a Franco-Russian alliance.

The Triple Entente states also each faced unique problems. France had an impressive colonial empire and desired revenge for the Franco-Prussian War, but its relatively stagnant population and economic limitations created justifiable pessimism as to the likelihood of victory against Germany. Britain’s empire truly was awesome, but its government worried about Germany’s long-term intentions, particularly its seafaring ambitions; however, London was unsure as to whether to engage in a potentially costly continental war for which it was ill-prepared. The Russian

Empire was poor, backward, and under continuing threat of domestic insurrection; yet, it also was experiencing rapid economic growth, beginning to turn its great mass of peasants into an educated industrial work force, and undertaking a serious program of political reform. Moscow was ambitious in the Balkans and elsewhere, but very much aware that the troubled Russian state might be unable to bear the weight of a long war.<sup>20</sup>

With retrospect, almost every scholar would agree that in 1914 the European great power system did not enjoy strategic stability, and that this made the war possible. Yet, at what point did the great power system become critically unstable? Had it been precariously unstable for a decade or more, but merely lacked a catalyst that would touch off a war? Perhaps the latter is the case, but there were events before 1914 that presumably could have served as “good enough” catalysts for a European war—the First and Second Moroccan Crises of 1904 and 1911, for instance, were treated quite seriously by contemporaries. The European balance of military power did not change significantly from 1911 to 1914, but in the first case diplomacy defused the crisis, while, in the second, war was the outcome.

One of course could argue that tensions built up over time, with goodwill and trust slowly disintegrating because of progressive crises. This is not an unreasonable supposition, but it does not necessarily bolster the notion that strategic stability is readily calculated—indeed, it perhaps undermines this notion. In 1904 and 1911 crises were resolved through negotiation, but in 1914 the system was not stable enough to prevent war. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, most thoughtful ob-



servers did not expect war. Quite the opposite, in fact: they trusted that any crisis resulting from the murder would end peaceably, in keeping with the pattern of the recent past.

What, then, would have given the international system the stability necessary to prevent war? Although Germany very much *hoped* that it would be able to crush France in a matter of weeks, no major power could be certain that it would be able to strike a quick, fatal blow to its enemies – all the participants knew that they were risking participation in a disastrous bloodletting. Of course, that is precisely what then occurred; the two sides were balanced closely enough that a long war, from which either side could have emerged victorious, resulted. Indeed, in 1917 the Central Powers were dictating peace terms to the former Russian Empire, and it appeared likely that France and Italy soon would be in a similar position.

Given the attitudes and fears of great power policymakers of the day, it is plausible that crisis stability would have been enhanced if there had been a greater *inequality* in military power – although in mid-1914 no great power could be sure of victory, all of them believed that, if they fought cunningly, meaningful victory could be attainable at a nonruinous price. Yet, even if it is true that a starker imbalance between the two sides would have prevented war, we cannot know definitively how much deeper military inequality would need to have been to prevent war in 1914. It is possible to develop all manner of counterfactual scenarios in which war would not have occurred in 1914, but we cannot test them (e.g., perhaps the existence of an additional ten active German army divisions would have convinced Russia and France to abandon Serbia to its fate – or, perhaps, it would have made no political difference whatsoever).

These historical questions and problems underscore the disconcerting fact that strategic stability is inherently flawed insofar as human events have a chaotic component: given that individuals interact with each other in unpredictable, and sometimes surprising, ways, seemingly rock-solid strategic stability can be illusory.<sup>21</sup> Efforts to foster strategic stability may fail not because of some miscalculation of the balance of military forces or similar flaw, but simply because actual human beings are not perfect rational actors—pride, arrogance, fear, and other attitudes and emotions can lead to disaster.

The implications of this simple observation potentially are significant: if strategic stability can fail at unpredictable times for unpredictable reasons, efforts to assess stability not only are inherently unreliable but sometimes may be dangerous, as a leader who assumes that a relationship with another state is stable unwittingly may tempt fate. Indeed, if a potential opponent apparently much desires continued peace, an actor has a particularly strong incentive to exploit that agreeableness by acting aggressively, as war seems unlikely. In this way, apparent stability can indirectly encourage reckless behavior. However, the aggressive state may well miscalculate how tolerant its peer will be of provocative behavior. For example, having calculated that strategic stability will ensure that any political crisis will not result in warfare with another state, a leader may choose to play to domestic jingoism, saber-rattling and making intentionally hollow threats. Most likely, the results will be what he or she expects—a domestic political gain and the ultimately peaceful resolution of the crisis. Sometimes, however, the outcome will be a catastrophic 1914 result.

The balance of military forces certainly is a component in the maintenance of peace, but it is only one in an overall context that encompasses all the major factors shaping the relationship between two security communities—and, that relationship, in turn, influences and is influenced by the overall international system. Moreover, one also must keep in mind the “deep” factors that shape relationships between and among states—such as physical geography and strategic history—and which themselves are inextricably intertwined. Physical geography does not straightforwardly determine strategic history, but it does shape the advantages and disadvantages that a security community enjoys, and remains meaningful throughout that community’s existence, disciplining the options available to it. In turn, the interaction of that community with other strategic actors will craft a strategic history that is unique to it. That security community will have a “folk memory” that, while not necessarily accurate in its historical details, will shape its attitudes and behavior toward its peers.

## **GETTING PAST THE COLD WAR: STRATEGIC STABILITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

Any useful discussion of future strategic stability must be grounded firmly in an understanding of how the international system has changed in the past 2 decades. In the 20th century, the international system experienced two tectonic shifts.<sup>22</sup> First, a multipolar great power system whose center of gravity was in Western and Central Europe—one which already had been gravely stressed by World War I—collapsed altogether in the mid-1940s. In its place, a bipolar system took shape. However, by historical standards it

did not last for long; in well less than half a century bipolarity collapsed—happily, though surprisingly, with relatively little violence. For the purposes herein, the Post-Cold War period that followed lasted for approximately 1 decade, from December 26, 1991 (the date of the USSR’s dissolution), to September 11, 2001 (9/11). This era was marked by U.S. unipolarity and limited global hegemony.

Although it was common at the time for observers to refer to Washington as the global hegemon, this rather overstated the power of the United States: the rest of the world was not reduced to satellite status, and Washington encountered frustrating limits to its power. Among other things, it attempted and failed to: mediate an end to Israeli-Palestinian hostilities; convince Russia to remain on the path to development of a healthy democratic system; and end warlordism in Somalia to create a stable government in that country. Nevertheless, during this time the United States was by far the greatest individual power, with clear conventional superiority over any other military power, the world’s largest economy in both absolute or purchasing power parity terms (unless one treats the European Union [EU] as a single unit), and the diplomatic sway that one would expect such a mighty polity to enjoy.

The 9/11 attacks did not bring an abrupt end to U.S. quasi-hegemony. However, they did mark the beginning of a new emphasis in U.S. foreign policy. During the Post-Cold War years, U.S. grand strategy was decidedly fuzzy. Washington put forward broad policy goals, such as furthering democratization and economic liberalization globally, but pursued them in an unfocused manner—the result was a jumble of regional (e.g., North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO])

expansion) and country-specific (e.g., containment of Iraq) strategies that did not form a coherent global whole. The Bush administration's declaration of a Global War on Terrorism solved this problem, but created a potentially larger one: a near-obsessive focus on the threat presented by Islamist terrorist movements and a related impatience for the final resolution of the "Saddam Hussein Question."<sup>23</sup>

While the Obama administration dropped the use of the phrase "Global War on Terrorism," it did not radically shift the grand strategic focus of the United States: it de-emphasized Iraq, but shifted attention to Afghanistan and Pakistan. More recently, the Arab Spring created circumstances in which the United States found itself attempting to cope with rapid political change in several North African and Southwest Asian countries. The Arab Spring itself was a good demonstration of the reality that apparent strategic stability can be an illusion that dissipates in an eye blink. Although the particular circumstances leading to the Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya Wars were very different, if one steps back they all form a somewhat coherent but deeply flawed grand strategy: the United States continues to focus its military power on certain countries in the Muslim world and attempts to use that power to stabilize them and, in turn, build a long-term partnership. In other Islamic countries, it does not use kinetic military action, but attempts to accomplish similar goals through diplomacy and economic incentives.<sup>24</sup>

The reason for this focus on specific Islamic countries is partly due to the simple pressure of events: the wars in Afghanistan and Libya were "random" insofar as they resulted, respectively, from the Taliban's unwillingness to hand over individuals responsible

for a surprise attack on U.S. soil and Muammar Qaddafi's obstinate refusal to slip gently into prosperous retirement—and the resulting Franco-British conviction that he therefore must be removed militarily by NATO. For a cocktail of reasons, there has been a good deal of “action” — both violent and nonviolent— in Islamic countries in recent years, and the attention of U.S. policymakers often follows television cameras. However, U.S. policymakers also tend, by their behavior, to drive those television cameras to particular places. If the American government were as inclined to intervene in, say, the Democratic Republic of Congo, as it has been in certain other parts of the world, Kinshasa's hotels today would be overflowing with journalists and camera crews.

This does not imply that there is a clear, multi-stage U.S. strategy to change the Islamic world into something new — indeed, the opposite is more nearly the case: American actions often have been ad hoc; insofar as there has been a panoramic vision (as in the Bush administration's quasi-plan for counterterrorism through the spread of democracy), it has been unrealistic. There is, however, a clear pattern to U.S. behavior, with counterterrorism and a related concern for the political health of Islamic countries having become the central focus of U.S. grand strategy. By all appearances, Washington's attitude essentially is that strategic stability in the Islamic world is the most fundamental challenge to global strategic stability.

This is, however, not necessarily an accurate perception. It is becoming increasingly clear that unipolarity is, at best, very deeply corroded — and, given the spectacular rise of China, it would not be unreasonable to declare it dead. China's rise, however, has not resulted in the recreation of bipolarity, but, rather, is

part of the re-emergence of multipolarity: Russia, troubled though it is, remains a great power; Japan has the economic resources necessary for great power status, even if it remains reticent politically; India is rapidly emerging both economically and politically; and Brazil clearly is bidding for acknowledgement as a top-tier power, though it thus far has failed to demonstrate global influence commensurate with such a status. At this point, we cannot confidently predict precisely what states will be on the list of great powers 2 decades from now—for instance, by then the EU might have welded itself into a great power, acrimoniously collapsed, or remained somewhere between these two extremes. It is clear, however, that a multipolar global system is taking shape. Moreover, because we are in a period of, historically speaking, quite rapid transformation in the global system, strategic instability is endemic.

In addition, just as in the 16th century, technological, economic, and social factors are conspiring to encourage instability in the international system. Even absent war, the fortunes of individual states can rise or fall with surprising speed; the best illustration of this is the contrast between the impoverished China of the Cultural Revolution—an ideologically bizarre near-failed state in which a scientist was more likely to be sent to the countryside to do stoop labor than to receive a research grant—and today's near-superpower. There is no sign that this is slowing down; indeed, we should expect further acceleration in the pace of socio-political change.

It is notable that, just as in the 16th century, social and religious change menaces stability both within and among countries. Religious awakenings are occurring not only in the Muslim world, but also in Christian

countries in Africa—and, in an obvious formula for trouble, in mixed Christian-Muslim states such as Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> China may also be in the early stages of a mass religious awakening, with unpredictable effects. India remains religiously tense, and not only because of the always strained Hindu-Muslim relationship; rapid economic and social change appears to be intensifying the political struggle between those who would define India as a nonsectarian democracy (the traditional preference of the Indian political elite) and those who wish India to have a more assertively Hindu identity. At the same time, in many countries there are non-religiously-driven calls for political change—or, as in Libya, cases in which democratic secularists, sincere proponents of both electoral democracy *and* greater religiosity in government, and would-be totalitarian theocrats find themselves temporarily thrown together, with an unpredictable ultimate outcome. One might hope that in the 21st century religious sentiment will not cause as much violence as it did in the 16th and 17th centuries, but the record of the last decade does not inspire confidence.

This “perfect storm of instability” has serious implications for the security of the United States, though it should not be the cause of undue panic. Washington remains, by a long stretch, the greatest military power, and its economy is the world’s largest, unless the EU is counted as a single whole (a practice with obvious shortcomings, given the ongoing European debt crisis). The gap between the power of the United States and its nearest peer, China, remains enormous—and, if it is prudent, the United States can take advantage of this fact to act as a force for global peace. Washington cannot artificially *create* strategic stability—the global strategic environment is inherently unstable. It can,



however, exert much influence over how the multipolar system develops in coming years.

Unfortunately, this is no simple matter of being hawkish or dovish, but requires a sophisticated grand strategy that is constantly being re-evaluated and re-balanced to account for changing circumstances. In such a grand strategy, U.S. goals would include: maintaining its position as the greatest individual power; seeking to discourage the creation of great power alliances that would threaten U.S. interests (such as a Sino-Russian axis); preventing great power war, if possible; preparing to win a great power war militarily and craft a postwar global security environment friendly to U.S. interests, should it prove impossible to prevent a conflict; and attempting to craft institutions, whether formal or informal, that will serve to diffuse enmity between great powers and allow the powers to work together to cope with global strategic instability.<sup>26</sup>

This is a very tall order, but it is the most sensible blueprint for the reorientation of U.S. grand strategy. The continuing U.S. focus on the Islamic world is myopic. Certainly, events in some Islamic countries are very important, but – especially as the large-scale production of fossil fuels is becoming far more evenly distributed globally, with new technologies promising a massive increase in output in many countries, including Brazil, Canada, and the United States<sup>27</sup> – there is little reason to believe that they offer some sort of key that will solve the puzzle of global strategic stability. Washington would benefit from a broader perspective that considers the international system as a whole and focuses particular attention on competition and cooperation among the great powers.

## CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC STABILITY IN A CHANGING WORLD

Cold War-era conceptions of strategic stability have little salience in the 21st century security environment. At this point, a focus on nuclear arsenals—particularly on just the Russian and American nuclear arsenals—is archaic. There is good reason to question, for instance, whether MAD can carry the weight of ensuring that there is no naval clash between China and the United States over the issue of Taiwanese independence. Even the consideration of military power more broadly is only partially illuminating. We now are in a multipolar environment in which many factors, including alliance relationships among the various great and medium powers, will impact the character of the security environment.

As discussed above, the entire global system is a period of epochal change; this transformation cannot be prevented or controlled, only guided to a limited degree. With that in mind, the following general points concerning strategic stability are offered:

1. Social, economic, technological, religious/ideological, and other broad trends impact global strategic stability deeply. Military power is only part of the enormously complex strategic stability equation.

2. Strategic stability is fluid to the degree that the term itself is problematic. Events do not invariably follow a clear timeline in which one event builds on another to create a stable environment. International circumstances can change quickly—for example, the French Revolution radically altered a seemingly stable (if competitive) European security environment. Similarly, the “Velvet Revolutions” in East-Central Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union demolished a bi-

polar system that appeared stable to the point of being nearly inert.

3. Problematic though the term might be, strategic stability does express an important truth: at some points the international system is far more prone to extreme political violence than it is at other times.

4. Strategic stability and strategic instability are not absolute conditions, especially in a vibrant multipolar system. It is more helpful to think of a “stability continuum” that, in practice, ranges from extremely stable to extremely unstable. However, *precisely where the global system is on that continuum at a given time cannot be measured reliably*—at best, one can make an educated guess.

5. Leaders who are excessively confident in the stability of the international system are apt to make decisions that increase the likelihood of war.

6. As the second example cited in #2 above illustrates, strategic stability is not inherently good—sometimes instability can allow for positive change. However, generally speaking, great power warfare is more likely when the security environment is highly unstable.

7. Strategic stability cannot *reliably* be increased through arms control or similar measures. It is true that arms control agreements may assuage the fears of particular states and thus might have a positive impact on the overall security environment. However, the historical evidence would seem to indicate that this is a minor effect that is easily overwhelmed by negative events: the golden age for arms control was the 1920s, but the Great Depression created conditions ripe for hyper-nationalist militarism and eventual war.

The United States would do well to engage in a sophisticated discussion of strategic stability that places the term solidly in the political context of this century. Two decades now have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it is well past the point where it is possible to have any confidence that the prevention of warfare is a matter of balancing nuclear arsenals. Rather, Washington must be intellectually prepared to grapple with the enormously more complicated task of working to guide a rapidly emerging multipolar international system that will be confronted by the crushing pressures of technological, social, and economic change.

### ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 3

1. See John Hillas, Mathijus Jansen, Jos Potters, and Dries Vermeulen, "On the Relation Among Some Definitions of Strategic Stability," *Mathematics of Operations Research*, Vol. 26, No. 3, August 2001, pp. 611-635.

2. In regard to varied and problematic uses of the term "stability" during the Cold War era, see Colin S. Gray, "The Urge to Compete: Rationales for Arms Racing," *World Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, January 1974, pp. 229, f. 57.

3. Colin S. Gray, "Strategic Stability Reconsidered," *Daedalus*, Vol. 109, No. 4, Fall 1980, pp. 135.

4. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., indexed ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 605.

5. See Albert Wohlstetter's highly influential 1958 RAND report *The Delicate Balance of Terror*, reprinted in Robert Zarate and Henry Sokolski, *Nuclear Heuristics: Selected Writings of Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2009, pp. 177-212.

6. Like “strategic stability,” the notion that arms race is contestable. See Colin S. Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War: Policy, Strategy, and Military Technology*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993; and *Idem*, “Arms Races and Other Pathetic Fallacies: A Case for Deconstruction,” review essay on *Plowshares into Swords: Arms Races in International Politics, 1840-1991*, by Grant T. Hammond, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3, July 1996, pp. 323-336.

7. See C. Dale Walton, “Nuclear Questions: Bush Administration WMD Security Strategy and the Second Nuclear Age,” in Stephen J. Cimbala, ed., *The George W. Bush Defense Program: Policy, Strategy and War*, Herndon, VA: Potomac Books, 2010, pp. 185-202.

8. Recently, the State Department has indicated an interest in moving toward an international environment in which “mutual assured stability” (MAS) would underpin strategic stability, but at this point MAS is little more than a vague concept. See Ellen O. Tauscher, “Strategic Deterrence and the Path to a World of Mutually Assured Stability,” July 5, 2011, available from [www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/170575.htm](http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/170575.htm).

9. The degree to which the Soviet leadership was confused and disoriented by the events of the 1989-91 is vividly recorded in Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, updated ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

10. As Diarmond MacCulloch notes:

It was not the first time that the new medium of print had provoked a general debate, way beyond those who could actually read the pamphlets and books involved: that had happened over the previous decade, when European authorities launched an ambitious publicity campaign to raise a new continent-wide crusade against the Turks. However, what the Luther furor now demonstrated was that there was an independent public opinion, and the printing presses that fuelled it could not be controlled by the existing hierarchies in Church and Commonwealth.

*The Reformation: A History*, New York: Penguin Books, 2005; originally published 2003, pp. 124.

11. On King Henry's decision to seize political control of the Church in England, see G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Making of the English Church*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007; and Richard Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation*, 2nd Ed., London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

12. On Spain's hegemonic ambitions, see Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998; and *Idem*, *Success is Never Final: Empire, War, and Faith in Early Modern Europe*, New York: Basic, 2002.

13. See Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*, 2nd Ed., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005; and Robert Knecht, *The French Religious Wars, 1562-1598*, Oxford, UK: Osprey, 2002.

14. See Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477-1806*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996.

15. On the origins and course of the war, see Ronald G. Asch, *The Thirty Years War: The Holy Roman Empire and Europe, 1618-48*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 1997; and Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, originally published 2009.

16. On the latter, see Michaél Ó Siochrú, *God's Executioner: Oliver Cromwell and the Conquest of Ireland*, London, UK: Faber and Faber, 2008.

17. A deep appreciation of how such trends can interweave to power political change undergirds Daniel Walker Howe's magisterial history of the United States in the decades immediately following the War of 1812. See his *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of the United States, 1815-1848*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

18. For an especially detailed exploration of the period before the outbreak of the conflict and the months following its outbreak, see Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Volume 1: To Arms*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

19. Austria-Hungary's political atmosphere in this period is vividly portrayed in the classic Edward Crankshaw, *The Fall of the House of Habsburg*, New York: Penguin Books, 1983, originally published 1963.

20. An intriguing challenge to the conventional interpretation of which state bears the greatest responsibility for the outbreak of the war is offered by Sean McMeekin, who argues for Russian culpability. See his *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. A more traditional view, that Germany was chiefly at fault for the conflict, is argued vigorously in Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, New York: Doubleday, 1994.

21. On the question of how chaos shapes strategy, see Colin S. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History*, London, UK: Frank Cass/Routledge, 2002; and Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, McNair Paper #52, Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 1996.

22. On this theme, see C. Dale Walton, *Geopolitics and the Great Powers in the 21st Century: Multipolarity and the Revolution in Strategic Perspective*, London, UK: Routledge, 2007.

23. This is not to claim that the Iraqi government had any significant operational relationship with al-Qaeda. Rather, the point is that if one views the globe through a "counterterrorism lens," the creation of a Middle East anchored by a stable, democratic, and U.S.-friendly Iraq truly would appear to be a triumph. Whether that goal was *realistic* is another question entirely. See C. Dale Walton, *Grand Strategy and the Presidency: Foreign Policy, War, and the American Role in the World*, London, UK: Routledge, 2012.

24. During the Bush years, democratization was seen as a key aspect of this process of stabilization and partnership; however, the Obama administration appears (prudently) to be somewhat less centered on this area. For instance, it ultimately acquiesced to President Hamid Karzai remaining in office despite the voter intimidation and massive fraud that marked the 2009 Afghan presidential election. By doing so, it tacitly admitted that the democratization project in Afghanistan had collapsed. More

recently, the administration took noticeably little action, even rhetorically, when protesters calling for democracy were quite publicly crushed in Bahrain.

25. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 3rd Ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 208.

26. How the United States might best attain these strategic goals is discussed in detail in Walton, *Grand Strategy and the Presidency*.

27. See Daniel Yergin, "Oil's New World Order," *Washington Post* online ed., October 28, 2011, available from [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/daniel-yergin-for-the-future-of-oil-look-to-the-americas-not-the-middle-east/2011/10/18/gIQAxwDw7L\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/daniel-yergin-for-the-future-of-oil-look-to-the-americas-not-the-middle-east/2011/10/18/gIQAxwDw7L_story.html).