



# Reality of the Stability–Instability Paradox: What Is the “Hybrid War under Nuclear Threat” That Has Come to the Fore in the Russia–Ukraine War?



Nuclear weapons have not been used in actual combat even once in 77 years, ever since the atomic bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

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The Russia–Ukraine War has highlighted a number of questions regarding the nature of security in relation to nuclear weapons. For instance, we have two questions: “Will nuclear weapons actually be used?” and “Does the stability–instability paradox shape US behavior?” meaning whether Russia’s nuclear threats have restricted the United States and Europe from engaging in the conflict, thereby making the invasion of Ukraine possible. These two questions point to extremely important difficult issues when considering the future international order for nuclear weapons. Does the operation of Russia’s nuclear arsenal in the Russia–Ukraine War signal the start of the “Third Nuclear Age” with a growing need for nuclear deterrence premised on the use of nuclear weapons (Takahashi Sugio, “Viewpoint: Ukrainian crisis: The beginning of the ‘Third Nuclear Age,’” *Yomiuri shimbun*, March 24, 2022), or the beginning of an era of unmanageable nuclear risk?



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Taking these questions as a starting point, I would like to discuss how Japan ought to deal with nuclear risks in a strategic environment of “hybrid war under nuclear threat” at the three levels of what deterrence approach to adopt, the role of arms control in regulating strategic competition, and the norms that ought to underlie the international nuclear order.

## **Were the United States and Europe deterred by Russia?**

Before the outbreak of the war, the Russian army concentrated an estimated 150,000 troops near Ukraine’s borders. These included a variety of short- and medium-range missiles capable of carrying both nuclear and conventional warheads. On February 19, missile exercises were conducted under the command of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Moreover, when President Putin declared a “special military operation” on February 24, which in practice was a declaration of war, he warned that “Whoever [...] create[s] threats to our country, to our people” will face an end “that you have never encountered in your history.” He then announced that the nuclear deterrent forces would be assigned to the “special mode of combat duty” and the strategic nuclear weapons go on high alert. Russia’s nuclear deterrence is supposedly for the purpose of “deterrence of a potential adversary from aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies [and] national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State,” with the Russian army appearing to operate with an integration of nuclear and conventional forces. As such, the signals sent around the time of the outbreak of the war appeared to be intended to keep the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries away from their direct involvement in Ukraine and to keep the war at a local level.

In response, the United States conducted patrol flights of B-52 strategic bombers, but at the same time postponed the launch test of Pershing-III, quickly signaling a desire to avoid all-out nuclear war with Russia, while NATO likewise opted for de-escalation, for example by indicating that it has no intention of using direct military force. NATO also rebuffed Ukraine’s calls to set up a no-fly zone, as it would have meant direct fighting with Russia.

If these decisions by the United States were made out of concern about involving Europe in a nuclear war or escalation into all-out nuclear war between the United States and Russia, you could say that the Russian side possessed the escalation-control initiative. In the sense that it deterred the involvement of the United States and Europe and facilitated military operations, Russia’s policy of deterrence was effective (although this is not synonymous with achieving the political objectives of the war).

Of course, the restrained response of the United States was partly the result of it viewing Ukraine not as a treaty ally and not as being of strategic importance. It is necessary to consider how much sense such an institutional difference makes to the question of the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence against treaty allies such as NATO and Japan based on that. While the United States prioritizes avoiding an all-out nuclear war, it also lacks options to effectively keep in check the other party’s actions in case of nuclear escalation on the theater level, which keeps it from intervening effectively and easily invites enemies to act resolutely in regional conflicts. These concerns of a “stability–instability paradox” have come to be recognized with a sense of reality.

## **The concept of “integrated deterrence” in a hybrid environment**

The nuclear dimension of the Russia–Ukraine War offers important lessons about how alliances should be conducted when there is the risk of a “stability–instability paradox” in East Asia. Deterrence

anticipates conventional armed aggression, in the sense of “detering threats from directly reaching Japan; at the same time, if by any chance a threat should reach Japan, to defeat such threat” (National Security Strategy of Japan 2013), is insufficient. In addition to the integrated operation of new spheres such as cyber and space into the traditional combat spheres of land, sea, and air, we need a comprehensive strategy to seamlessly operate in the information and economic spheres as well as cooperate with allies and partners inside and outside the region and implement strategies in the diplomatic sphere to gain the support of international society in multilateral arenas, thereby influencing other countries and persuading (detering) them to act as we would like.

This is the problem awareness behind the concept of “integrated deterrence,” and discussions are currently going on in Japan regarding the defense capabilities and equipment needed for this ahead of the formulation of the National Security Strategy of Japan planned for publication at the end of 2022. The case of Ukraine shows that the key basis for avoiding decoupling between allies is your own self-defense efforts and strong willingness to resist. It is important to retain your own resilience and capacity to continue fighting to make the potential enemy feel that it is difficult to achieve their political and strategic aims through military action and hybrid warfare under nuclear threat.

In order to deter an enemy in East Asia, where gray zone situations are becoming the norm, what kind of costs are effective to impose in peacetime, and what kind of response is necessary in the unlikely event that a crisis escalates? We likely need to design our deterrence approach to anticipate “hybrid warfare.” In this sense, when it comes to “hybrid war under nuclear threat,” information warfare over cognitive space and countering nuclear-threat responses to economic and political pressures in the form of economic sanctions also constitute important elements of “integrated deterrence.”

Discussion was raised about how to deter and dissuade through a crossover between signaling and measures in the military and non-military spheres that include cognitive space, economic sanctions, and diplomatic efforts.

Actions aimed at influencing the other party’s thinking through information manipulation are considered a means of escalation-control. This has more to do with hindering the establishment of a political foundation and an international environment to make it more difficult for the enemy to achieve strategic and political objectives in war, rather than military operational objectives.

Even before the outbreak of the war, the United States was actively disclosing confidential information on the actions of the Russian military and decision-making within the Russian government, thereby seeking to curb Russian military activities. They denied false information about the manufacture and use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) as well as prevented the formation of a narrative to justify Russia’s own use of chemical and nuclear weapons. This prevents the forming of international public opinion favorable to the enemy and makes other countries hesitate to support Russia, thereby contributing to building a network of economic and diplomatic encirclement against Russia. It reminds of the necessity to further deepen our analysis of the role of competition in cognitive space in deterrence.

Another issue is the relationship between economic sanctions and nuclear use/deterrence. The economic sanctions against Russia are very large-scale, including the financial sector for example by freezing foreign dollar assets and suspending transactions with central banks as well as the lifeblood energy sector, covering coal, natural gas, and crude oil.

These economic sanctions cannot achieve their objectives without China, India, and other influential developing countries. To begin with, these measures have no immediate effects, while their effectiveness is limited in their potential to alter Russian intentions in the short term. Meanwhile, in its “basic policy

in nuclear deterrence,” Russia claims that it will use nuclear weapons in case of threats to the national survival of Russia itself or its allies. The Russian economy, contrary to their stated aim of favoring domestic production, has already become dependent on imports in term of its industrial structure, including the defense industry, so that economic sanctions have made it possible to sever supply chains and thus make it difficult to wage war. If this is perceived as a threat to the state’s survival, then it may be interpreted as trigger for the use of nuclear weapons.

In addition, what we will need in terms of diplomatic action in the future is to improve the effectiveness of the alliance network in the Indo–Pacific region. In particular, there is an urgent need to mend Japan–South Korea relations. In the event of a Taiwan emergency, for example, China will seek to drive wedges between countries in order to impede effective use of assets by the United States and its allies. If so, the relationship between Japan and South Korea, the weakest link in the hub-and-spoke alliance network in East Asia, will become a target. It is essential to improve Japan–South Korea relations and strengthen the alliances. A key to the effectiveness of the Indo–Pacific region’s “integrated deterrence” is likely to be how to overcome alliance structure vulnerabilities in East Asia.

### **An era of impossible arms control?**

Spurred by this war, there is a growing understanding of the need to build a seamless, strengthened deterrence readiness in response to crisis escalation as well as the capacity to handle situations where deterrence fails. Meanwhile, arms control pessimism is on the rise. The reason for this is that as the strategic environment deteriorates, such as with the decisive breakdown of relations between the United States and Russia and the acceleration of China’s military expansion, it is growing impossible for them to find common interests worthy of cooperation, while pursuing of arms control with an enemy country is perceived as a kind of “weakness,” thus potentially triggering a more hardline and dogmatic stance on the part of the enemy country.

The escalation crisis management within the arms control regime that was formed throughout the Cold War has collapsed in the eyes of the United States and Europe (conversely, Russia can be said to have “exploited” the American expectation of arms control to take the initiative), which has served to make the significance of arms control even more opaque. You could claim that this failure was unavoidable due to the philosophical concept underlying the institutional design of the arms control regime between the United States and Russia.

Since the end of the Cold War, the arms control regime has eliminated the nuclear element when engaging in crisis escalation/risks on the theater level (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the INF Treaty), developing toward regarding nuclear equilibrium at the strategic level as “strategic stability.” However, Russia, which is inferior in terms of conventional forces, violated the INF Treaty by developing a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM), 9M729 (SSC–8). At the same time, the effectiveness of the INF has been lost, for example through the possession of short- and medium-range warheads capable of carrying either nuclear or conventional warheads. As a result, the United States notified Russia of the revocation of the INF Treaty, with the Treaty expiring in August 2019.

In 2018, then Secretary of Defense James Mattis said, “Any nuclear weapons used at any time is a strategic game-changer” (to the House Armed Services Committee, February 2018). This can be interpreted that Russian use of non-strategic nuclear weapons could be met with NATO’s retaliation, whether with nuclear or conventional weapons, and that this may include powerful retaliation targeting Russia’s strategic military bases and political decision-making centers including President Putin.



However, a threat of all-out nuclear war, as a deterrence against nuclear blasts either on a small scale or with the aim of intimidation on the theater level, may not be received with credibility by the Russians. Subsequently, Russia continued to signal nuclear escalation at the theater level and carries out military operations under nuclear coercion.

Considering possible arms controls with China, the superiority of China's missile capabilities at the regional or theater levels and the asymmetry in US–China strategic goals remind us of the “stability–instability paradox” if the United States intervention is prevented. For its part, Japan would like to avoid having the US–China relationship follow the conventional concept of military control between the United States and Russia. The idea of including non-strategic weapons in the negotiations at this point in time is unlikely to resonate with China, which is discovering a role for and superiority in non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities.

Moreover, China suspects that the United States, in advocating arms control, is unwilling to pursue “fairness” or “balance.” The Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry Fu Cong has said, “Arms control that aims at increasing one's own security at the expense of the security of others is neither acceptable nor sustainable (at the Ninth EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference, November 2020). He is arguing that the United States is moving away from maintaining strategic balance and stability, which are basic principles of arms control, and is instead trying to use arms control to establish strategic competition advantages.

In a sense, China's claim is correct. To begin with, in parallel with the main narrative that the arms control regime of the United States and the Soviet Union (the United States and Russia) institutionalizes mutual assured destruction (MAD) to ensure strategic stability and lower the risk of all-out nuclear war, it was also meant to set the rules for strategic competition. Firstly, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty) seals missile defenses and excludes defensive aspects from the competition, thereby defining a framework of competition to limit it within offensive aspects. Secondly, while establishing a *pro forma* balance of forces, “strategic stability” under the mutual vulnerability (or MAD) guaranteed by the second strike capability has oriented the nature of competition toward technological races, such as developing a multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) with improved targeting accuracy.

China does not want to give up its striking and nuclear superiority at the sub-strategic level, while also wanting the United States to recognize mutual vulnerability at the strategic level. On the other hand, the United States intends to regulate missile capabilities at the sub-strategic level and to set rules for competitive advantages. With totally opposite orientations, it will be very difficult for them to establish an arms control regime between the two countries. For Japan, the United States tolerating mutual vulnerability at the strategic level might end up creating a strategic environment where China intensifies its offensive at the regional level amid a “stability–instability paradox.”

If the purpose of “deterrence” is not just to prevent military escalation but also to impede the achievement of political goals, we need to envision how best to utilize arms controls as the important elements of defense diplomacy, alongside maneuvers in the spheres of information and economy. Further, agreeing on how to regulate weapons is not the only purpose of arms control. For example, the way China currently operates and trains with its DF-26 Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles might suggest an abandonment of China's traditional policy of No First Use of nuclear weapons. By putting the issues on the table, showing intentions (though not entirely), and promoting communication and trust-building to understand the other party's way of thinking, stakeholders would be able to improve the accuracy of estimating “calculated strategic ambiguity.” We may also expect to reduce the risk of

unnecessary unintentional escalation and stabilize deterrence. The United States and Japan should think about how to use arms control to shape strategic competition and develop the competition in a favorable way.

### **The future of the nuclear order**

As of September 2022, the Russia–Ukraine War is far from over, and it is much too early to summarize the significance of this war for international politics of nuclear weapons or how it has influenced perceptions of their role in security. If the international nuclear order enters an era of severe strategic competition and confrontation that remains chaotic, the probability of nuclear use will increase. In the time of a deteriorating security environment, where there is no choice but to prepare for a worst-case scenario and think about deterrence measures that anticipate the use of nuclear weapons, the international community needs to re-affirm the principles of nuclear risk reduction and a minimum common ground for avoiding the risk of inadvertent nuclear use by accident or miscalculation.

One is the 1985 Reagan–Gorbachev Statement “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” The other is to keep the record that nuclear weapons have not been used in actual combat even once in 77 years, ever since the atomic bombing of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945.

Regarding the former, despite its affirmation in the joint statement of the P5 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) on January 3, 2022, Russia is making nuclear threats in Ukraine as if to nullify that statement. When it comes to attacks on nuclear power plants and civilians, resolute authoritarian policymakers face relatively little pressure from international law and norms and thus the influence of the international society and its efficacy are relatively limited. However, these steady efforts also raise the bar for the use of nuclear weapons by shaping the narrative about legitimate nuclear use, and it should also likely contribute to providing a foundation for diplomatic efforts to build mechanisms for cooperation in the international society.

### **The importance of arms control through US–Japan cooperation**

In the increasingly severe strategic environment of East Asia, the following four points that Japan should work on in concert with the United States should be proposed.

- 1) As a unique measure of Japan, Japan should enhance its defense capabilities and national resilience to not succumb to unacceptable demands under nuclear intimidation.
- 2) The US–Japan alliance should strengthen its deterrence architecture to deal with “hybrid war under nuclear threat,” or escalation further complicated by emerging technologies, and entanglement among multiple domains like nuclear, non-nuclear, cyber, and space.
- 3) Japan and the United States should pursue the establishment of rules and frameworks for strategic competition with rivals, and explore how to best use arms controls to restrain the opponent’s capabilities and behaviors.
- 4) Japan and the United States should work to maintain the system of values and norms provided by the nuclear non-proliferation regime, centering on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and sustain the international society’s political foundation against nuclear proliferation.

Extended deterrence consultations between Japan and the United States have become institutionalized as the Japan-US Extended Deterrence Dialogue. However, when it comes to arms

control, for which perceptions and priorities tend to differ despite its importance, it must be said that mechanisms for close consultation and coordinating policy is weak. Coordinating how to strategically utilize arms control through US–Japan cooperation in the future should be an important piece of the puzzle, although easily overlooked compared to other elements of “integrated deterrence.”

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