

Sir Stephen Lovegrove speech at CSIS, Washington DC

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, thank you to Dr John Hamre and Seth Jones, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies for hosting us today.

And thank you to all joining us here at CSIS or virtually.

I must begin by talking about the war in Ukraine.

We recently passed the grim milestone of 150 days since Putin launched this unprovoked, illegal war, bringing untold suffering to the innocent people of Ukraine.

I'm afraid the conflict fits a pattern of Russia acting deliberately and recklessly to undermine the global security architecture. That's a pattern that includes the illegal annexation of Crimea, the use of chemical and radiological weapons on UK soil, and the repeated violations that caused the collapse of the INF Treaty.

And we will continue to hold Russia to account for its destabilising actions as an international community.

A new security order

What is happening in Ukraine is also a manifestation of a much broader contest unfolding over the successor to the post-Cold War international order.

This contest has profound implications.

It will decide whether we live in a world in which regionally-aggressive powers such as China and Russia can pursue 'might is right' agendas unchecked – or a world in which all states can ensure their sovereignty, competition does not spill over into conflict, and we cooperate to protect the planet.

As this contest unfolds, we are entering a dangerous new age of proliferation, in which technological change is increasing the damage potential of many weapons, and those weapons systems are more widely available.

We need to start thinking about the new security order.

Both elements that have guaranteed strategic stability in the past – effective deterrence in all of its forms, combined with a renewal of a functional arms control framework – need urgent attention.

Policy makers have been urged recently to learn to navigate the absence of order. That is in part good advice. But it is important to build some handrails to guide our thinking as we prepare to negotiate the complex landscape ahead.

In the 1950s and 60s, policy makers faced similarly uncertain terrain.

The advent of nuclear weapons had created a tension between 'strength' and 'stability'.

'Strength' – having the speed, initiative, and surprise to ensure security – and 'stability' – there being nothing for either side to gain from striking first.

Out of this period, academics and policy makers developed the concept of strategic stability, building on the work of Thomas Schelling, Herman Kahn and Samuel Huntington.

In simple terms, strategic stability meant establishing a balance that minimised the risk of nuclear conflict. It recognised that an atmosphere of 'competitive armament' generated the need for continuous dialogue.

It was delivered through two core components – deterrence and arms control.

In Madrid last month, NATO reaffirmed strategic stability as essential to our collective security.

But we should be honest – strategic stability is at risk.

During the Cold War, we thought in terms of escalation ladders thanks to Herman Kahn: largely predictable, linear processes that could be monitored and responded to.

Now, we face a much broader range of strategic risks and pathways to escalation, driven by developments of science and technology including rapid technological advancement, the shift to hybrid warfare, and expanding competition in new domains such as space and cyber.

These are all exacerbated by Russia's repeated violations of its treaty commitments, and the pace and scale with which China is expanding its nuclear and conventional arsenals and the disdain it has shown for engaging with any arms control agreements.

Indeed, Rebecca Hersman and Heather Williams – former and current directors of the CSIS Project on Nuclear Issues – have argued that we are now more likely to see escalation wormholes – sudden, unpredictable failures in the fabric of deterrence causing rapid escalation to strategic conflict.

Moreover, the Cold War's two monolithic blocks of the USSR and NATO – though not without alarming bumps – were able to reach a shared understanding of doctrine that is today absent.

Doctrine is opaque in Moscow and Beijing, let alone Pyongyang or Tehran.

So the question is how we reset strategic stability for the new era – finding a balance amongst unprecedented complexity so there can be no collapse into uncontrolled conflict.

The new NATO Strategic Concept sets the direction on which we must now build.

This will be difficult. But we have a moral and a pragmatic duty to try.

A more expansive and integrated approach

The circle can only be squared if we renew both deterrence and arms control, taking a more expansive and integrated approach to both.

In March last year, the UK published the Integrated Review, our broadest and deepest review of national security and international policy since the end of the Cold War.

The Integrated Review's emphasis on integration was a deliberate response to the blurring of the boundaries between war and peace, prosperity and security, trade and development, and domestic and foreign policy.

In both the US and UK, we have already started moving to deeper integration in our approach to deterrence.

From a UK perspective, integrated deterrence means bringing together all of the levers of state power – political, diplomatic, economic and military – to deliver effect.

It means tailoring our responses, be they military, diplomatic or economic, to the specific context – taking into account our understanding of our adversaries' motivations.

Integrated deterrence also means working in a more joined up manner across government and society more broadly.

It means working more closely with our allies and our partners – through NATO, but also through new groupings such as AUKUS, and strengthening our relationships with partners in the Euro-Atlantic, Indo-Pacific and around the world.

And we must give due, arguably overdue, regard to improving and strengthening deterrence by denial. In an age of revanchist aggressive powers, committed to the concept of spheres of influence, we must ensure that the vulnerable have the ability to defend themselves, thereby deterring aggression in the first place.

A central challenge though is to avoid this leading to inevitable proliferation.

So the next step should be to develop our thinking on integrated arms control, advancing a dynamic new agenda that is multi-domain, multi-capability and draws together a much wider set of actors.

Historically, arms control has consisted of a set of regimes imposing limits on specific capabilities, alongside strategic stability dialogues focused on risk reduction.

Much of the existing architecture remains vital – such as the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

That last, the NPT, has been the cornerstone of nuclear security and civil nuclear prosperity for the last 52 years, and the UK remains committed to its implementation in full.

We will work with all States Parties at the forthcoming Review Conference to strengthen the treaty as the irreplaceable foundation and framework for our common efforts.

The reality, however, is that current structures alone will not deliver what we need a modern arms control system to achieve.

Many other long-standing agreements have fallen apart as a result of Russian violations, despite them offering the conflict management, confidence building and transparency that Moscow claims to seek, and that logic would dictate it should desire.

These include the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe; the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and Open Skies, all of which were designed to provide stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Other proposals – such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons – simply do not address the obstacles that must be overcome to achieve lasting global disarmament.

And many of the frameworks that are still in place were designed for a world that no longer exists:

- They offer patchy coverage and don't cover all capabilities, including some dangerous new and emerging technologies;
- They often rely upon a clear distinction between civilian and military-use cases;
- They were largely designed for a bipolar context;
- They do not fully take into account for the pace of technological development and information-sharing, which can challenge the efficacy of control lists; and.
- And they rely on an information environment that is increasingly susceptible to corruption and disinformation.

Integrating arms control across categories of proliferation

Further integrated arms control will need to extend across several interlinked and overlapping categories of proliferation.

First, we need to look at the increasingly large set of weapons where the barriers to entry and ownership are low and getting lower such as cyber weapons, low-tech drones, small arms and light weapons, and chemical and biological capabilities.

These weapons alone may not change the strategic balance – though the jury is still out on cyber – but they will interact in unpredictable ways with broader strategic competition.

Second, we need to look at new weapons systems or technologies that only the most powerful states could develop and that threaten to upset the strategic balance. Again, cyber is a key capability in this category, alongside space-based systems, 'genetic weapons', nuclear-powered cruise missiles, directed energy weapons and hypersonic glide vehicles.

We must also remain vigilant as technological development means that some of this second category could – over time – shift into the first.

For example, the International Institute for Strategic Studies has assessed that in 2001 only three states possessed dedicated land-attack cruise missiles.

Today, at least 23 countries and one non-state actor have access to these weapons. And that last point is important. Many non-state actors could, absent proper control, develop further capabilities.

A third category, we must be eternally vigilant for traditional nuclear weapons being developed by rogue states, dangerous in its own right of course but also potentially sparking a rush amongst regional neighbours to do the same.

As the P5 leaders agreed in January this year, and to use Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev's resonant phrase, a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

And a fourth category, we must acknowledge that existing nuclear states are investing in novel nuclear technologies and developing new 'warfighting' nuclear systems, which they are integrating into their military strategies and doctrines and into their political rhetoric to seek to coerce others.

For example, we have clear concerns about China's nuclear modernisation programme that will increase both the number and types of nuclear weapon systems in its arsenal.

Combined, this is a daunting prospect.

Binding legal frameworks should remain our long-term goal.

But there is no immediate prospect of all of the major powers coming together to establish new agreements.

So, as we agreed in the NATO Strategic Concept, our immediate focus should be getting on with the work of strategic risk reduction.

Principles for integrated arms control

Today I propose four principles to guide our approach to integrated arms control.

The first principle is that we should have a pragmatic focus on establishing and regulating behaviours.

That does not rule out the possibility of new formal agreements to regulate capabilities. We should keep pursuing them where they are useful and achievable, and look for opportunities to update existing ones, as the UK did in supporting the extension of New START.

But the breadth and complexity of the proliferation landscape means there is no one-size-fits-all approach. We need to establish new norms for behaviour in the context of hybrid- and tech-enabled conflict, setting red-lines for the grey-zone as it emerges as the new arena for strategic competition.

It is more likely that we will be able to find initial common ground and mutual benefit by raising our thinking above tit-for-tat exchanges on individual systems or technologies.

And we can take encouragement from, for example, the work our two countries have led in the UN to introduce a framework to reduce space threats through norms, rules and principles.

This has helped to galvanise a global discussion on what constitutes responsible space behaviour.

Here I commend the US commitment earlier this year not to conduct destructive, direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing.

This behaviours and norms model is one that already has strong foundations for expansion.

For example, the UK Attorney General spoke earlier this year about the importance of bringing non-intervention principles to life in the context of cyber.

She proposed an international congress on the kinds of cyber behaviours that could be unlawful in peacetime – such as using cyber to disrupt supply chains for essential medicines or vaccines.

The second principle is that we should widen the conversation.

Strategic stability has historically been the business of major powers.

But in the current context, strategic stability cannot be negotiated by this group alone.

There remains a clear need for certain, specific conversations between limited partners. But we need to make a far stronger case that building and maintaining stability is in every nation's interest and that there is a shared pool of responsibility.

Future deliberations on arms control should – where appropriate – be global by design, extending not just to traditional allies and partners in Europe but to a much wider group of countries.

And we need to create a bigger tent, thinking beyond states to industry experts, to companies and technologists who will play a critical role in understanding the risks and opportunities of dual-use and other new technologies, and in setting the standards that govern them.

The third principle is that we should start with dialogue.

We must create and preserve space and channels for dialogue to build trust and counter disinformation.

In time, this may lead towards our long-term aim of new or updated binding agreements.

But there is a significant intrinsic value in dialogue itself. In the obligatory Churchill quotation, we want “jaw-jaw, not war-war”.

During the Cold War, we benefited from a series of negotiations and dialogues that improved our understanding of Soviet doctrine and capabilities – and vice versa.

This gave us both a higher level of confidence that we would not miscalculate our way into nuclear war. Today, we do not have the same foundations with others who may threaten us in the future – particularly with China.

Here the UK strongly supports President Biden's proposed talks with China as an important step.

Trust and transparency built through dialogue should also mean that we can be more active in calling out non-compliance and misbehaviours when we see it.

And at the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in August, we will stress the importance of Russia respecting its obligations under the NPT, in both deed and word.

The final and fourth principle is that we should take early action to renew and strengthen confidence-building measures.

The goal of confidence-building measures is to contribute to, reduce, or even eliminate the causes of mistrust, fear, tension and hostility.

They help one side interpret correctly the actions of the other in a pre-crisis situation through an exchange of reliable and interrupted, often private information on each other's intentions.

Confidence and trust grow when states are open about their military capabilities and plans. That is why governments can report every year their national military spending to the UN, as well as their recent weapons transfers.

I'm afraid Is there any clearer example of the collapse of these mechanisms than the invasion of Ukraine?

When I and others questioned the build-up of forces on the border we were assured "it's just an exercise". We didn't believe it, and were right not to do so. Nevertheless, we must try to get back to a point where "reassurances" like that are worth something.

So we now need to re-energise the existing Euro-Atlantic architecture, and extend the approach into new geographic regions.

As we seek to strengthen confidence-building measures there is also a major opportunity to harness new technology and make better use of open source materials to improve our capabilities and capacity to identify, share and verify information.

For example, the UK's recently-published Defence AI strategy sets a clear ambition for Artificial Intelligence to play a key role in counter-proliferation and arms control, including for verification and enforcement.

Again, confidence building is an area where I believe we should – as a global community – be able to make progress irrespective of wider political contexts. The indices of self-interest and mutual benefit are both clear to see.

Conclusion

Let me be clear: this new agenda for arms control will be difficult to deliver. We will need to take incremental steps, but we can make progress.

History shows us that we can forge a path through uncertainty.

After World War Two, the world had no template for managing the atom bomb's destructive power. So we created new frameworks.

It took years. But it was possible. And it was done. And it was possible despite the advent of the Cold War.

Indeed, some of the most significant breakthroughs in arms control – including both nuclear arms control and the advent of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe – came when tensions between the West and the USSR were at their peak.

Let me be clear: arms control frameworks, open to abuse and violation as they

always have been, are only one side of the coin. Effective deterrence mechanisms and capabilities, tailored to the current and developmental threats are indispensable.

So let us not neglect either side of the coin – deterrence or arms control – and start on the foundations from which we can build a strategic stability in these perilous times.

Thank you.