

The (Elusive) Search for Strategic Stability

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The combination of technological and geopolitical change puts pressure on the search for strategic stability in the contemporary international environment.

The search for stability has been an element of the contemporary international environment since the dawn of the nuclear age. Today, as this special issue of the *Texas National Security Review* highlights, both geopolitical and technological change call that stability into question.

The concept of strategic stability emerged during an era of bipolar competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, when the fundamental risk of nuclear escalation was thought to lock both superpowers into a certain level of mutual deterrence that removed incentives for destabilizing escalation. Francis Gavin's essay on the thought of Thomas Schelling, "Strategic Stability and Its Limits," points out that this conception of strategic stability had its own unrecognized internal tensions and inherent limits. The belief in the inexorable logic of mutually assured destruction, however, had a fundamentally structuring effect on the way in which the superpowers competed and communicated in the realm of nuclear deterrence. New technological capabilities were parsed with minute care for their effect on the stability of the nuclear balance.

As the essays in this volume highlight, the viability of strategic stability is now under pressure from multiple directions. One challenge, as Harold Trinkunas and Herbert Lin note in their introductory essay, "Emerging Technologies and the Future of Strategic Stability," is that non-nuclear weapons can have effects previously reserved for nuclear arsenals. These developments create a need to think more deeply about the interactions between emerging technologies in conventional warfare and about emerging technology's effect on the nuclear level. Will the ability to achieve what were previously "nuclear effects" below the threshold of nuclear use heighten or dampen the stability-instability paradox, and generate lesser or greater overall stability at the strategic level?

The answer to this question is, in aggregate, hard to predict—perhaps unsurprising, but frustratingly inconclusive. As Cameron Tracy and Lin point out in their articles, human ability to judge the impact of emerging technologies on the battlefield has not been especially accurate. Lin's essay, "On Optimism About New Military Technologies," probes the deep psychological, social, and institutional roots of "techno-optimism" in ways that suggest that accurate prediction will be hard to attain.

Another contribution to this discussion is Jacquelyn Schneider's article on "Cyber Operations and Nuclear Stability." Her article examines the ways in which the risks for stability introduced by cyber operations depend heavily on the structure of the networks that underpin different parts of the American nuclear enterprise, in ways currently not adequately appreciated by policymakers and strategists. Both the fundamental American, perhaps even human, approach to technological innovation and the specific characteristics of some types of emerging technology, therefore, militate against a single, uniform prediction about these technologies' effect on stability.

Both Tracy and Michael Horowitz point out that human expectations of the effect of emerging technology are also not linear (or linear in their accuracy). Over time, whatever conclusions policymakers reach about the effects of technology today may not apply tomorrow, and frequent learning and updating are likely to be required for the estimation of technology's effects to be usefully accurate.

Tracy's article, "Technological Surprise and Normalization Through Use," highlights a process of reversion to "normalization," wherein "systems previously considered revolutionary or archaic are incorporated into existing modes of warfighting and accepted as normal components of those practices." This process shows how these dynamics apply to technologies that have been used in the fighting between Russia and Ukraine since 2022.

Horowitz, in his article, "Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Strategic Stability," proposes a different model, but one that also displays variation over time. He identifies a "hype cycle" where technology's impact is initially overestimated, then underestimated, before ultimately settling on accurate estimations of capability. Based on this model, he concludes that "the relationship between AI and strategic stability in the nuclear domain is not strictly linear."

The variability of emerging technology's effects over time rests in part on other factors that have also evolved as technology has: the number of countries that possess nuclear and other sophisticated, emerging technological capabilities for military use, and the types of leaders that sit in command of the growing number of technologically enabled nuclear arsenals. Gavin reminds us that, during the Cold War, strategic stability depended on assumptions about bipolar interactions and bilateral mutual deterrence—assumptions that no longer hold in a

world of horizontal proliferation across the current nine nuclear powers: the United States, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel. These developments are accompanied by other shifts in the contemporary geopolitical environment that recently led Shivshankar Menon, writing in the previous issue of the *Texas National Security Review*, to characterize the world today more in terms of disorder than order itself, and to remind us that stability has been the exception more often than the rule.¹

Another factor that exacerbates the difference between the already fraught nuclear debates of the Cold War and those of today is the collapse of the traditional arms control frameworks that were painstakingly debated and negotiated under bipolarity, even as the complexity of the current nuclear environment increases. It's little wonder that Vipin Narang and Pranay Vaddi—two strategists who worked on nuclear, space, and cyber issues in the Biden administration—recently referred to this concatenation as a “category 5 hurricane” of risks for the emerging nuclear landscape.²

Finally, as Rose McDermott notes in her article, “The Influence of Psychological Factors in the Search for Strategic Stability,” the psychological biases that already challenge our assumptions about human rationality as applied to nuclear deterrence may be exacerbated by the interaction between two factors that characterize today's emerging technologies and nuclear politics. The first is an increased number of authoritarian or personalist leaders who command the world's modern nuclear arsenals, whose psychological biases face fewer social and institutional constraints and may therefore be pronounced. Second, these risks—as acute as they are—may be still further heightened by the novelty of emerging technology.

This new technology demands feedback and learning if one is to calibrate, understand, and predict the effects of its use for deterrent or coercive purposes—something that authoritarian leaders and political systems may be systematically less likely to do.

The effects of emerging technology on strategic stability may vary by the technology involved, over time, across countries, and across individual leaders—all of which are shifting rapidly, with limited time for feedback and perceived pressure to form judgments to inform strategic decision-making quickly. Trinkunas and Lin point out that all is not lost—the articles in this issue contain several recommendations about how to use what we know about the development and adoption of emerging technologies in deterrence and warfare to push toward stability, rather than instability. But these essays also point out why the search for strategic stability in an era of geopolitical and technological change may, ultimately, prove more elusive than hoped. ■

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Image: 6th Air Refueling Wing by Airman 1st Class Helen Ly.³

1 Shivshankar Menon, “A New World Order? Careful What You Wish For,” *Texas National Security Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2026): 72–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tns.00024>.

2 Vipin Narang and Pranay Vaddi, “How to Survive the New Nuclear Age,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-survive-new-nuclear-age-narang-vaddi>.

3 For image, see <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/9411041/ready-refuel-6arw-kc-135-crew-prepares-global-thunder-26>.

