



# The Need For Strategic Reassurance in the 21st Century

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The end of the Cold War eliminated the intense competition between two fundamentally opposed systems that had dominated the strategic landscape for more than four decades. However, the hopes and aspirations of the early post-Cold War years for growing harmony among the major powers have not materialized—a failure that was dramatically illustrated by the impact of the 1999 U.S.-NATO airstrikes against Yugoslavia and the mistaken bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Those events greatly exacerbated Russian and Chinese suspicions of U.S. strategic intentions, and two years later deep mistrust of the United States remains largely unabated. U.S. mistrust of Chinese and Russian strategic intentions has similarly deepened in recent years.

The post-Cold War problem of persisting strategic suspicions has been further highlighted by U.S. plans for building a national missile defense (NMD) system. Not only Russia and China but also many other countries, including U.S. friends and allies, suspect that the real goal of the NMD program is to strengthen the United States' already vast military superiority to enable it to pursue a unilateralist global strategy and to "bully" other countries with impunity. They warn that the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the entire edifice of painstakingly negotiated arms control and non-proliferation agreements could come tumbling down, leading to unbridled proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the end of any sort of global strategic balance.

The Bush administration (and the Clinton administration before it) has responded to this "apocalypse now" scenario with protestations that the United States has no such hegemonic aims but rather is only seeking to build a limited NMD system with the modest objective of defending against a handful of nuclear-armed missiles from "rogue" nations or an accidental launch by Russia or one of the other members of the nuclear club. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld publicly insists that NMD "threatens no one."

There is, therefore, a significant disconnect between international and U.S. perceptions of the strategic and political implications of NMD. No doubt U.S. officials feel deep frustration with the inability of others to understand the purportedly benign intentions behind NMD, a problem complicated by the ardent supporters of a full-blown NMD system capable of neutralizing Russia's and China's nuclear deterrent force.

Secretary of State Colin Powell seemed to acknowledge the problem posed by mistrust when he promised that the United States would not move forward on NMD without "consultations," not only with U.S. allies but also with Russia and China. The United States is unlikely to persuade others of the wisdom of its NMD plans, however, if it does not address the fundamental issue of how others perceive U.S. strategic intentions and then take steps to address those concerns.

## The Need for Strategic Reassurance

Strategic mistrust can exacerbate problems that might have been more easily resolved had they been dealt with on their own merits. It can also increase the chance of misperceptions and the likelihood that those misperceptions will do real damage to relations. In order for two states wary of each other to solve policy problems, they may need to first struggle to demonstrate that, despite differences over specific issues, their long-term intentions toward each other are benign—in other words, they may need to engage in strategic reassurance.

Strategic mistrust is frequently based on misunderstandings or worst-case assessments, and although nations may have different or even conflicting interests, there is frequently a basis for significantly reducing strategic mistrust. States that have mutual suspicions often also have a wide range of common economic, political, and security interests. This is certainly true of the relationships that the United States has with Russia and China.

"Strategic reassurance measures" (SRMs) seek to address the deeper causes of mistrust among nations, especially suspicions about the perceived long-term political, military, and economic objectives—that is, strategic intentions—of other powers. SRMs may both enhance the prospects for nations agreeing to arms control measures—including revision of arms control agreements like the ABM Treaty, in the case of NMD—and also be advanced by arms control steps that serve to ease suspicions of strategic intentions. For the Bush administration, strategic reassurance may be a prerequisite to proceeding with a decision on deployment of a limited NMD system without incurring unacceptable political and strategic costs.

Strategic trust and mistrust should not be viewed as absolutes in international politics but rather as relative—probably every international relationship has elements of both. Even bitter enemies have some limit to strategic mistrust, as was the case between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and even close allies, such as the United States and Israel, may harbor some suspicions about each other's intentions. Thus, it might be useful to think of international relationships as being on a sliding scale, with strategic mistrust at one end, strategic trust at the other, and most relations somewhere in the middle, especially in the post-Cold War world. An extreme of strategic mistrust would be fear of imminent military aggression while total strategic trust might be found only in a "borderless" world. The gradation of trust or mistrust is significant, however, as is the way states' perceptions of each other can shift one way or the other.

## Causes of Strategic Mistrust

Mistrust of another nation's long-term political, military, and economic objectives can have many sources, both real and imagined. One nation may fear that another has ambitions to acquire its territory or resources or to exploit or dominate it in some other way. Such suspicions can be based on a history of aggression or conquest, including colonialism, or there can be more diffuse misgivings based on the sheer size and proximity of states as well as on religious, ethnic, cultural, or racial differences. Ideological factors such as fear of communist or authoritarian regimes can be a source of strategic mistrust. Two nations may have been historic rivals for regional power, such as Iran and Iraq, Japan and China, or France and Germany. Once aroused, strategic mistrust

may be sustained in collective memory, such as the continuing suspicion in Asia that Japan may once again embark on military aggression based on its actions from the World War II era for which it is perceived as having never fully atoned.

Strategic mistrust can be exacerbated by the rise and fall of nations due to shifts in the balance of comprehensive national power—that is, a country's overall strength as measured by its economic, military, political, social, and technological capabilities. A sense in one nation of its pervasive relative decline can create perceptions of a growing security threat from more successful states and a need to find new means of leverage over potential adversaries. That is, even if the other states' strategic intentions have not changed, declining or failing states may nevertheless perceive new dangers. Conversely, a sense of relative strengthening of comprehensive national power may generate suspicions among other states that the rising power will use its enhanced power for aggressive purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The last decade has seen dramatic changes in the relative standing of nations. On the surface, the main cause of this rapid shift has been the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which changed the fortunes not only of Russia and the other former Soviet republics, but also reverberated throughout the world, particularly in Asia, where the fortunes of North Korea, China, India, and other countries have shifted significantly. However, these recent changes in comprehensive national power also reflect the impact of longer-term and broader global trends, especially the rising importance of economic performance and technological prowess in determining a nation's overall power and international status. A key factor has been how well nations adapt to the process of globalization, which is creating new winners and losers at an unprecedented rate in a worldwide struggle to implement the free-market formula for economic success.<sup>2</sup> A few examples of recent developments:

### **Russia:**

Despite a vast and rich resource base and a well-educated and skilled population, Russia has experienced a near collapse of its economic system, while the once-mighty Russian military is in near disarray. This extraordinary decline in fortunes has exacerbated Russia's suspicions that the outside world—especially the United States and NATO countries—no longer recognizes it as a great power, does not take into account Russian security interests, and may perhaps be trying to further diminish its international influence as well as thwart its re-emergence as a great power.

### **China:**

While Russia has declined from a global to a regional power with little more than its nuclear weapons to sustain its claim to big power status, China's growing comprehensive national power suggests that China may be the world's second most important nation in the 21st century. However, China's increasing economic strength and its military modernization program have heightened concerns among China's neighbors and the United States about Beijing's long-term intentions once it is in a stronger position to assert its interests.

## **Japan:**

Japan's decade of economic stagnation contrasts sharply with the unparalleled growth of the Chinese economy and China's emergence as a great power. This asymmetrical economic growth has dramatically shifted Japanese perceptions of the Sino-Japanese balance of power and has exacerbated suspicions in Japan about China's strategic intentions while increasing concern that China will pose a growing threat to Japan's national security.

## **India:**

Despite growing demands for international recognition as a great power, India has seen its position eclipsed by its long-standing rival, China, which, in the last two decades, has experienced far faster economic development and has had a significantly greater impact on international events as well as on the global economy. Acquisition of nuclear weapons was viewed in New Delhi in part as a means to strengthen India's claim to international recognition as a great power and to narrow, if not close, the gap between India and China in the balance of comprehensive national power.

## **The United States:**

The United States continues to be a rising power, belying premature notices of its decline in the 1980s. The technology boom of the "New Economy," despite its recent lumps, has fueled an unprecedented expansion of the U.S. economy underpinned by extraordinary productivity growth that has kept down both inflation and unemployment as the United States has led the world economy. At the same time, the U.S. lead in military technology as well as military power continues to grow. Rising U.S. power has fueled suspicions of U.S. strategic intentions, especially in China and Russia but also among U.S. allies that fear a U.S. tendency toward increasing unilateralism.

Whatever its root cause, strategic mistrust may be exacerbated by the specific policy decisions of governments, which may not bespeak evil long-term designs but may nevertheless be perceived as such. For example, in September 1997, the United States and its NATO partners conducted a military exercise in Kazakhstan that the Chinese perceived as part of a broader U.S. containment strategy against China. In fact, the planners of the exercise had simply failed to consider China's reaction to the military exercise in a nation on China's border. Similarly, when the United States engaged in air strikes against Yugoslavia, it based its actions on concerns about European security and human rights and not on assertion of a new global strategy, but China perceived the action as demonstrating a willingness to interfere unilaterally in its internal affairs and a first step toward possible U.S.-NATO military intervention in Xinjiang or Tibet.

National missile defense has the potential to be another policy decision that has dramatic ramifications for other nations' strategic mistrust of the United States even when it is not the intention of the United States to pose a new threat to their strategic interests. Indeed, it may be the most pressing issue of strategic mistrust for the Bush administration in its relations with U.S. allies as well as with Russia and China. If the United States proceeds with NMD without easing strategic suspicions of Russia, China, and the allies that it is

trying to enhance what is already its overwhelming preponderance of military power, it could find itself facing several challenges to U.S. strategic and political interests.

Suspensions could deepen that the United States harbors hostile strategic intentions and will seek to use its military superiority and potential impunity to nuclear retaliation to bully Beijing and Moscow and even militarily interfere in their internal affairs or to the detriment of their vital security interests. A national missile defense could fan the flames of nationalism that were intensified by the 1999 U.S.-NATO attack on Yugoslavia and the mistaken bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade as well as lead to military countermeasures.

Russia and China would also be likely to pull closer together in international opposition to U.S. interests and in military and military-technology collaboration, especially regarding measures to counter ballistic missile defenses. Both Russia and China could be expected to be less cooperative in efforts to halt proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and some Russians and Chinese may even advocate seeking to divert U.S. pressure on them by exacerbating U.S. problems with the "rogue" states. The Chinese leadership might not only be less cooperative regarding efforts to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, but might also come under increased pressure from the People's Liberation Army to resolve the Taiwan problem with force before the U.S. has an NMD system on line. Moreover, China has the resources and capability to greatly expand its current modest nuclear arsenal of about 20 nuclear-armed ICBMs capable of hitting the United States to hundreds of nuclear warheads on advanced systems to ensure that it could penetrate any NMD system.

U.S. NMD plans could lead to the weakening of the international arms control and non-proliferation regime, especially if Russia followed through on its threats to withdraw from various bilateral arms control agreements. Many countries in the world may view the U.S. unilateral action, including abrogation of the ABM Treaty, as tantamount to the United States seeking to extend its military advantage over the rest of the world while seeking to keep other states from enhancing their military capabilities through the restrictions that various arms control and non-proliferation agreements impose on them but not on the United States.

The United States could also wind up straining its strategic ties with Europe. Senior members of the Bush national security team apparently came to power believing that the Europeans would abandon or at least significantly quiet their concerns about the U.S. NMD program if the Bush administration presented it as a *fait accompli*. But the criticism of NMD heard by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld during his first meeting with NATO ministers in February suggests that the administration may underestimate not only the public relations task on NMD that it faces, but also the need to actually address European strategic concerns about the U.S. missile defense program. Failure to do so could at the least exacerbate the already-evident trend in Europe to pull away from NATO toward increasing reliance on all-European rapid reaction force and the European Security and Defense Policy.

At present, none of the major powers are implacable enemies, although they may have significant conflicts of interest. But if strategic mistrust based on each other's strategic intentions deepens, this could change, especially between China and the United States and perhaps between Russia and the United States as well. Growing mistrust could also

exacerbate the difficulty of solving or managing specific problems that might have been much easier to manage had they been dealt with on their own merits. Greater strategic trust, in contrast, while not eliminating real conflicts of interest, may prevent specific disputes from being perceived as indicative of malevolent intentions or even from leading to intractable enmity—and may facilitate the management or resolution of difficult issues.

## **The Nature of SRMs**

Strategic mistrust in the post-Cold War era creates the need for measures to reduce suspicions between and among states about their long-term political, military, and economic objectives—that is, their strategic intentions. Broadly speaking then, strategic reassurance measures are steps that one nation takes to address the concerns of other nations that are suspicious of its broad, long-run intentions. The defining characteristic of an SRM is thus its function or purpose—that is, to further strategic reassurance between and among states—and not the particular form or measure in itself.

Strategic reassurance measures are intended to go beyond the traditional objectives of their more focused cousins, confidence-building measures (CBMs) and arms control agreements. Historically, CBMs such as hot lines, pre-notification of military maneuvers, and incidents-at-sea agreements have been tactical measures aimed primarily at preventing accidental war or providing a means to prevent escalation should military conflict occur. They were not designed, however, to address the core values and strategic interests of nations.<sup>3</sup> Bilateral nuclear arms control agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union, for example, were not aimed at overcoming strategic suspicions of adversaries but rather at regulating and capping the arms race as well as maintaining strategic stability.

Although the architects of CBMs during the Cold War may have hoped that implementation of confidence-building measures in Europe or between the United States and the Soviet Union would eventually ease mutual suspicions—especially suspicion that the other side was preparing for aggressive war—both the United States and the Soviet Union continued to see themselves engaged in a protracted competition of systems with one likely to prevail over the other in the long run, whether through war or other means. In other words, the strategic intentions of the two competitors were not changed by CBMs and arms control agreements, which served to stabilize the military standoff and prevent accidental war but not to eliminate the fundamental strategic mistrust between the two sides.

This leads to a rather important point: if a state really does harbor aggressive intentions, it may not be possible (or desirable) to reassure others that they do not. In other words, strategic suspicions between nations may be based on an accurate assessment of hostile intentions of another power. For example, Kuwait certainly would have been correct in harboring strategic mistrust of Baghdad before Iraq's August 1990 invasion, just as most of Europe and Russia would have been wise to assess Hitler's intentions in 1939 in the most malevolent terms. In other words, strategic reassurance may not be possible without changes in actual strategic intentions.

In the post-Cold War world, however, the major powers are no longer adversaries in a zero-sum game. Rather, despite many differences on bilateral and international issues,

they have an enduring common interest in cooperation on a wide range of economic, political, and security issues. Yet, in many cases, there remain deep suspicions of each other's strategic intentions—suspicions that are often deeper and more widely held by publics and politicians than by government officials and national leaders—that could be alleviated by the application of strategic reassurance measures.

A key aspect of developing and implementing meaningful SRMs is an effort to understand the sources of mistrust between nations and thus to determine what measures to increase trust would be necessary and feasible. Through strategic dialogue or other means, the leadership of each state should try to determine the basis of the other side's strategic mistrust and which of its policies and actions are perceived as especially threatening, as well as what new steps could be taken to reassure the other side.

For example, while Japan's renunciation of war in its constitution and its decision to forego development of nuclear weapons have provided some strategic reassurance to neighboring countries that Japan has peaceful intentions, Japan's perceived failure to sufficiently account for its World War II crimes has contributed to lingering doubts in China and other Asian nations about Japan's long-term aims. Thus, a statement by a prominent Japanese politician about Japan's role in World War II that seeks to play down or deny Tokyo's war crimes, can create a new rift in Sino-Japanese ties by reinforcing Chinese suspicions about Japanese strategic intentions and hamper, if not undermine, efforts to resolve other outstanding bilateral issues.

Of course, it may become evident at any given time that taking the steps necessary to build strategic trust is not feasible, or at least that preliminary measures must be taken before the most crucial SRMs can be implemented. Under these circumstances, tactical CBMs intended to prevent conflict may be the best that can be achieved in the near term. But in such cases, policy-makers and the broader foreign policy elite should give serious thought to how strategic reassurance might be established and what near-term steps might start the process. Simply seeking to understand the basis of strategic mistrust on both sides might be in itself an SRM, though it might only be the beginning of a long, tortuous process.

It is also important to recognize that, as desirable as strategic reassurance may be, SRMs to enhance the security of one nation or a group of nations may also enhance the sense of strategic insecurity and suspicion of another state or group of states. NATO expansion may have strategically reassured Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, but it may have undermined previous efforts to reassure the Russian people about U.S.-NATO strategic intentions toward Russia. Similarly, the strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese alliance with the revised Defense Guidelines issued in September 1997 may have reassured Japan about its security vis-à-vis North Korea, but Beijing's suspicions of U.S. and Japanese intentions toward China and Taiwan were deepened, creating new obstacles in the path of Sino-American relations.

If the Bush administration is determined to proceed with NMD deployment, which seems likely at this point, it could take steps to minimize the suspicion that Russia, China, U.S. allies, and others nations have of Washington's strategic intentions because of its NMD plans. Secretary Powell's vague promise of "consultations" (which could simply mean advanced notification of U.S. decisions) suggests that the new secretary recognizes that the United States faces a problem of suspicions about the strategic intentions that underlie

its desire to acquire missile defense when it already has overwhelming military superiority and no true strategic competitor.

Strategic reassurance measures on missile defense would seek first and foremost to address the concerns—if addressing those concerns is indeed possible—of the various powers whose suspicions of the United States have been deepened by the U.S. NMD program. Perhaps the one concern that is shared by all these states is the potential negative impact of NMD on existing arms control and non-proliferation agreements and the prospects for proliferation of WMD in the future. To help allay such concerns, the Bush administration could push for ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and reconfirm U.S. commitments to other arms control and non-proliferation agreements.

To reassure the nuclear powers that their deterrents are secure, the administration should make a determined effort to reach an agreement with Russia on revision of the ABM Treaty. The Russians have so far resisted making a deal, but it is in their interest to deter the United States from abrogating the ABM Treaty altogether and instead place limits on the U.S. NMD program. ABM Treaty revision rather than abrogation would not only mitigate Russia's strategic concerns but would also signal to other states that the United States was drawing the line at a limited NMD system rather than taking the first step toward a more capable system that would threaten to neutralize the nuclear deterrent of Russia as well as of all other nuclear powers.

The administration should also make a determination that it is not seeking to neutralize China's small nuclear deterrent and that it is willing to engage in strategic stability talks with Beijing aimed at finding an accommodation to each other's strategic interests. Such an accommodation could include an understanding based on technical exchanges—requiring transparency from China about its long-term nuclear modernization plans as well as from the United States about the capabilities and limitations of its planned NMD system. These exchanges would leave the Chinese confident that, by the time of U.S. NMD deployment, their nuclear forces would be sufficient to maintain a minimum deterrent, while the U.S. would be assured that China's force modernization would be limited in scope as well. Moreover, President George W. Bush could provide strategic reassurance to China by publicly asserting that the United States expects to maintain a mutual deterrent relationship with China indefinitely.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the administration also should engage in an intense dialogue with its NATO allies to harmonize its NMD plans and policies toward arms control and Russia with their concerns about strategic stability, arms control, intra-European relations with Russia, European security vis-à-vis potential ballistic missile attack, and coupling of U.S. and European security.

There is no certainty that the United States can proceed with deployment of a limited NMD system and also reassure Russia, China, U.S. allies, and other states that it has benign strategic intentions in doing so. All, some, or none of the above may be reassured or reassured to some extent. But it does seem clear that NMD is now exacerbating suspicions of U.S. strategic intentions with nations whose response to NMD is of great importance to U.S. national security and strategic interests. Consequently, it also seems clear that it is in the U.S. interest to grasp the strategic-suspensions dimension of the NMD problem and to pursue policies aimed at strategic reassurance regarding NMD, especially in relations with Russia, China, and U.S. allies. Otherwise, the United States may have to

pay a high, up-front price in increased strategic mistrust for NMD deployment that could be counterproductive for achieving other U.S. strategic objectives.

## Conclusion

Overcoming unwarranted strategic suspicions and averting trends toward seeing each other as enemies in U.S. bilateral relations with key countries, especially China and Russia, will thus require conscious efforts by political leaders and government officials to foster mutual reassurance of strategic intentions. For policy-makers, strategic reassurance of other nations will require a comprehensive policy perspective that includes efforts to understand the strategic perspective and concerns of other powers; to design and implement specific SRMs to address those concerns and ameliorate suspicions, which may require concrete policy steps as well as verbal assurances; to harmonize the range of bilateral economic, political, military, and security policies with the aim of strategic reassurance; and to avoid inadvertent policy steps in other areas that might undermine bilateral steps aimed at strategic reassurance.

Successfully pursuing such a comprehensive policy aimed at strategic reassurance will no doubt face daunting obstacles, especially domestic politics in the United States. But even limited steps in this direction—especially government-to-government strategic dialogue—may help ease suspicions in critical relationships, establishing the basis for increased cooperation on a wide range of issues of mutual concern.

If the Bush administration simply pushes forward with its plans for a missile defense while dismissing other states' concerns on the grounds that they will in the end accept the U.S. position, the United States could wind up less secure than before it built the system. By contrast, if the United States undertakes strategic reassurance measures to dispel the notion that it is seeking hegemony—and, more specifically, the ability to meddle militarily in the internal affairs of Russia and China—it may be able to get what it wants without the strategic fallout that now seems likely.

The focus of this article has been on the need for the United States to understand the basis of mistrust of U.S. strategic intentions in its relations with other states and to design and pursue strategic reassurance measures to ameliorate suspicions and build strategic trust. The need for strategic reassurance is a very much a two-way street, however, and other nations, including Russia and China, need to seek to understand the basis of the strategic mistrust that their policies and actions engender in the United States and other countries and to adopt strategic reassurance measures themselves to address those suspicions and concerns. In addition, the approach outlined here is intended to provide a paradigm for consideration of the problem of strategic mistrust and the process of strategic reassurance among other nations, and, perhaps, among some subnational groups as well.

## NOTES

1. For the classic treatment of power transitions and conflict, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
2. See Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), chapters 2 and 3.

3. This is based on the notion of CBMs as originally conceived. Over the years, there has been a broadening of the definition of CBMs to include non-military measures such as political dialogues to enhance mutual understanding and limited trust among states harboring mutual suspicions. For an overview of the broadening definition of CBMs as well as a critique of this trend, see Marie-France Desjardins, "Rethinking Confidence-Building Measures," Adelphi Paper no. 307 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996). See also Michael Krepon, ed., *A Handbook of Confidence-Building Measures for Regional Security*, 3rd edition (Washington, D.C.: The Henry L. Stimson Center, March 1998).

4. For a more extensive discussion of China's concerns about U.S. NMD plans and the prospects for Sino-American accommodation on the issue, see Banning Garrett, "Facing the China Factor," *Arms Control Today*, October 2000.

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