

## Who Would Put a Stop After the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty?

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### Introduction

With the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty set to expire on 05 Feb 2026, several questions remain unanswered regarding arms control and strategic stability. Having entered into force on 05 Feb 2011, the treaty [placed several limits](#), such as 700 deployed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), and heavy nuclear bombers; 1,550 nuclear warheads on deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy nuclear bombers; and 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM and SLBM launchers, and heavy nuclear bombers.

After being extended for five years in 2021, the provisions of this treaty do not allow it to be extended beyond Feb 2026. In Sep 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin [asserted](#) that he is ready to observe a unilateral moratorium for an additional year after its expiration. At least, symbolically, this is a good note. However, the United States (US) President Donald Trump reportedly said, "[If it expires, it expires](#)". He argued that he would "Do a better agreement" with more players, such as China, on board. Vasily Kashin, Director at the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, argued that "[President Trump did not respond to President Putin's initiative](#)" regarding moratorium on nuclear weapons because the US is planning "Significant changes", including increasing the number of deployed nuclear warheads "By installing additional nuclear warheads on the existing missiles". For him, arms control has "[Already fallen apart](#)", and there are no signs that Russia "Will have any talks in the foreseeable future".

### Beyond Traditional Dimensions of Arms Control

This moribund has two facets. The bad one being that now there is no treaty between the US and Russia on limiting dangerous nuclear weapons. Though this is [not the first time](#) that Russia and the US have been caught in a situation without an arms control treaty, this year is different. Unlike previous cases, no negotiations are underway or planned this time. Russia admits that it had no specific contacts with the US and has [not received any response](#) regarding the treaty's expiration. With China increasing its nuclear warheads and remaining off the negotiating table, the US seems unlikely to engage in any arms control negotiations. The US considers any limitations on its weapons as [hampering its ability to deter two nuclear peers](#), Russia and China.

The second is that the traditional arms control and limitation treaties would be reconsidered in light of new challenges that were not addressed in earlier ones. Today's 'New' era is marked by the unprecedented pace of technological advancements in the field of weapons, driven by automation, uncrewed systems, precision strike capabilities, and the transforming role of Artificial Intelligence (AI). This creates a vast potential for the proliferation of both the fundamental bases of technology and the weapons systems themselves.

The traditional arms control and limitations treaties fail to capture the fact that the arms race has taken on a qualitative dimension, going beyond mere quantitative ones. Earlier treaties focused mainly on building confidence and predictability by limiting the numerical strength of nuclear weapons. For instance, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty banned all land-

based missiles of ranges from 500 kms to 5,500 kms. Today, strategic parity has to be reconsidered in the light of destructiveness (in terms of explosive power) and smartness (in terms of speed, precision, and AI-guided missiles or warheads) of weapons.

There is also a legal gap when it comes to new 'Disruptive' technologies. This era, marked by the proliferation of AI, hypersonic missile technologies, Multiple Independently-targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV), Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), and offensive cyber capabilities (that can cripple nuclear command and control systems), is legally unbridled. While there is a lull in regulatory talks between Russia and the US, China and the US have tried to discuss regulating the destabilising security impacts of AI in 2024 (though without any concrete outcome). However, the planned 2026 exchange between China and the US on preventing AI and biotechnology from becoming a zero-sum game is a welcome step. A successful formal agreement to regulate AI may set a precedent for other powers to follow suit. Likewise, there remain legal gaps in controlling and regulating MIRVs, hypersonic technologies (which can shorten decision-making time in a nuclear strike), and LAWS and cyber weapons (which can erode countries' second-strike capabilities by disrupting command-and-control systems).

Moreover, the question of non-nuclear strategic weapons cannot be wished away from the arms control talks. The ability to generate the same amount of 'Strategic Effect' as a nuclear warhead by using speed, increased conventional warheads' explosive capacity, and precision strike cannot be overlooked. The strict distinction between nuclear and conventional domains may be eroding for some technologically advanced countries. The Prompt Global Strike, for instance, can allow the US to strike any target with thousands of conventional precision-guided missiles within a short period of time. While this may not be legally considered a nuclear attack, it can, at least theoretically, cripple the second-strike capabilities of several states. The thermobaric weapons, which use oxygen to generate a high-temperature explosion and massive pressure waves, can match the destructiveness of tactical nuclear warheads. The Massive Ordnance Air Blast bombs, while being non-nuclear, can wipe out several blocks within a city. These conventional weapons need to be regulated within the framework of arms control and limitations negotiations. The so-called parity by merely limiting the number of nuclear warheads can easily be overturned by advanced conventional weapons.

This brings an associated challenge: unlike the Cold War, multiple parties must negotiate for arms control and limitations. The monitoring and verification mechanisms for nuclear and arms inspections have become tedious and increasingly complex, not merely because of the number of states, but also because of differing perceptions and goals among countries. China, today, is leading with its nuclear and conventional arms build-up. More countries are to follow suit with increased military budgets. The increase in the number of countries with large stockpiles of nuclear warheads, combined with newer technologies, strategic conventional weapons, and persistent legal gaps, makes it increasingly difficult to negotiate on the same line. Moreover, nuclear and non-nuclear countries will likely get into a spat on arms control due to differing concepts of strategic parity and diverging priorities.

## Conclusion

While the traditional nuclear treaties did not eliminate the dangers of nuclear fallout and strategic instability, they stabilised the relationship between the two largest nuclear powers, the US and Russia, through verification, data exchange, and confidence-building measures. These

mutually agreed constraints were aimed at predictability, thereby, reducing the incentive for either party to carry out a first nuclear strike out of fear of a security dilemma. In an era marked by more messy technologies, who would put a stop to the unbridled growth of arms, nuclear or conventional, after the end to the New START?

However, a caveat should be noted: the lack of an arms control regime and the associated arms race do not necessarily translate into deterrence failure or an incentive for offensive or preemptive actions. In such case, uncertainty paradoxically aids deterrence by convincing the statesmen that they cannot foresee the future course. In [Thomas Schelling's words](#), it is the “Threat that leaves something to chance” that highlights that states cannot confidently control escalation.

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**Article uploaded on 30-01-2026**

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