

PRACTITIONER PAPER

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Nuclear Arms Control Needs a New Start

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ABSTRACT

The expiry of New START has left the world's two largest nuclear powers without legally binding limits on their strategic arsenals, highlighting the broader decline of nuclear arms control and disarmament diplomacy. At the same time, geopolitical tensions, declining trust among states, and the emergence of disruptive technologies in the domains of artificial intelligence, cyber, and outer space are creating new risks of nuclear escalation. This article argues that existing forums for nuclear dialogue are no longer functioning effectively and that traditional approaches to arms control are ill-suited to today's multipolar security environment. In the absence of near-term political momentum for formal negotiations, the article proposes a renewed focus on understanding and reducing multi-domain nuclear escalation risks. It highlights the value of developing a new generation of arms control experts through Track 2 dialogue among nuclear-armed states to build common understandings and support future official level talks. By fostering innovative approaches to risk reduction and strategic stability, these efforts could help create the conditions necessary for a new era of nuclear arms control.

Following the expiry of New START in February 2026, there are no longer any arms control limitations on the arsenals of the two largest nuclear armed states—Russia and the United States. When arms control treaties fall away, it is not just the limitations themselves that are lost; it is also the data exchange, the on-site inspections, and the bilateral consultations. Such interactions not only help to verify compliance with the agreements, but they also help build trust and confidence between government officials through regular dialogue.

The expiry of New START should have been the opportunity for Russia and the US to reset their arms control dialogue or at the very least to start discussing what comes next. There was a proposal from President Putin to extend the New START limits for another 12 months, which was initially received positively by President Trump. However, no talks happened, most likely because the US wants a new treaty covering more than just strategic nuclear weapons, and crucially, one that brings in China. With China stating that it is up to the countries with the two biggest arsenals to talk first, we could be waiting some time before we see any arms control dialogue.

It is not just the nuclear arms control dialogue between Russia and the US that needs a reboot. The P5 Process, which was set up for the nuclear weapons states under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to discuss their responsibilities under the treaty, in particular article VI on disarmament, has been reduced to one or two meetings among mid-level officials per year. The NPT itself, having just suffered its third straight review conference without an agreed outcome document, only serves as a platform for showing how divided states are on a whole range of international security issues.

This picture of low levels of trust and lack of political will is compounded by rapidly emerging disruptive technologies that are adding to strategic instability and to the risks of nuclear escalation. Developments in domains such as cyberspace, outer space, and artificial intelligence (AI) are contributing to a wider array of strategic capabilities that could pose threats to nuclear forces. Actions across these domains could easily be perceived as preparations for attacks; for example, cyber operations targeting nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) systems or non-consensual rendezvous and proximity operations

by satellites. Many are worried that if AI is used in the decision-making process for nuclear systems, then this could negatively affect human judgement and increase the risk of escalation.

The only way to reduce the risks posed by these multi-domain threats is through dialogue among the nuclear-armed states. Discussing threats to nuclear forces should logically be part of strategic stability and arms control talks. However, what do you do when the fora for such discussions—bilateral dialogue, the P5 Process, the NPT, the Conference on Disarmament—are not functioning effectively? What is needed to give arms control dialogue the new start it desperately needs?

Ultimately, it will need political will. Agreements on nuclear arms control and disarmament can only be signed off at the highest level. Even the best diplomats in the world cannot bring about new arms control without direction from the top. The geopolitical context and the current strategic instability mean we are unlikely to see any major breakthroughs soon. There was some optimism last year when both Presidents Putin and Trump acknowledged the need for arms control talks, with Trump even using the word ‘de-nuclearisation’. Earlier this year, the Trump administration came to Geneva to call for multilateral arms control talks. However, little has been done, for example assembling teams of expert negotiators, to suggest that such talks will happen any time soon.

We also need fresh thinking. Arms control during the cold war was much simpler. There were just two sides. Despite the adversarial relationship between the US and the Soviet Union, they were able to compartmentalise nuclear issues. Negotiators from both sides built up expertise on how to do arms control and developed good working relationships with their counterparts. Life is not so simple now. Nuclear arms control dialogue can no longer happen in a vacuum. We need to produce a new cadre of arms control experts that can devise new solutions for today’s multipolar nuclear order. Addressing the many challenges to strategic stability needs to be done collaboratively, with experts from the nuclear armed states working together to reduce the risks posed by the third nuclear age.

In the absence of direction from the top, then this must be built up from the bottom. A good entry point for the next generation of arms control negotiators would be to build common understandings on multi-domain nuclear escalation risks. Multilateral discussions on these issues often happen in parallel—cyber, space, and AI all have their own processes, often staffed by different officials. Those working on nuclear issues lack detailed knowledge of these domains and how they may impact nuclear risk. It means that nuclear risk reduction discussions are fragmented and happen in different configurations.

We need to produce a new generation of experts who understand multi-domain nuclear escalation risk. Through bringing together early career experts from the nuclear armed states, we could help them reach common understandings of the threats and translate that into meaningful risk reduction measures. Given the geopolitical context, this process would need to start out as Track 2, with non-government experts. These experts would be close to their governments and would be ideally placed to advise them once inter-governmental, Track 1 dialogue restarts. Track 2 level work among experts would be an important contribution to reducing

tensions around threats to nuclear systems and could help create the environment for Track 1 dialogue to resume.

Approaching the lack of nuclear arms control dialogue through the topic of multi-domain nuclear escalation risks should also provoke a debate about the salience of nuclear weapons. In a world where the threats to nuclear systems and the risks of escalation are increasing, there needs to be genuine thought given to whether the risks of nuclear conflict now outweigh the deterrence value of nuclear weapons. As the risks of actual nuclear use are increasing because of the mix of rising geopolitical tensions and threats from disruptive technologies, there needs to be a conversation about when that risk becomes too great and nuclear states say enough is enough.

In a similar vein, a conversation about new technologies could also address the continuing utility of nuclear weapons and the issue of what comes after them. No-one wants nuclear weapons to be eliminated only for them to be replaced by new weapons of mass destruction. However, a sensible discussion around the deterrence value of new AI-enabled weapons systems could lead to the salience of nuclear weapons being gradually reduced and then ultimately eliminated. A new generation of scholars and practitioners could bring fresh approaches to how we assess national security and challenge traditional thinking on nuclear doctrines and postures.

We are likely to see a long period without new arms control agreements. However, such agreements don’t happen overnight and there have always been periods where making progress has been hard. The deadlock in nuclear arms control and disarmament diplomacy needs to be turned into an opportunity to try new approaches. This is difficult in an era of high suspicion and low trust. That is why it needs to start outside the official channels. Building a cadre of experts who can meet unofficially to discuss sensitive issues such as the AI/nuclear nexus or the threat to NC3 systems could open the door to new approaches to risk reduction, which in turn could help reset discussions on arms control. In the think tank world, there is a belief that these issues need to be addressed now, so we are seeing more initiatives designed to understand multi-domain escalation risk dynamics. For the nuclear armed states, recognising that these discussions need to happen and supporting such efforts would be a good (new) start.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Further Reading

Wan, W. 2026. “Addressing Multidomain Nuclear Escalation Risk.” SIPRI Research Policy Paper. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2026/policy-reports/addressing-multidomain-nuclear-escalation-risk>.