



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

GLOBAL NUCLEAR ORDER

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Context

- The recent **US President's renewed 'nuclear testing on an equal basis' with Russia and China** signaled a return to nuclear weapons testing, challenging decades of international restraint and global arms control dynamics.

Evolution of the Global Nuclear Order

- **Early Cold War (1945–1962):** The **Global Nuclear Order** has **evolved from Cold War deterrence** where the doctrine of **mutually assured destruction (MAD)** kept superpowers from direct conflict.
 - ♦ The dawn of the atomic age after **Hiroshima and Nagasaki**.
 - ♦ **US–USSR arms race** and the emergence of deterrence theory.
 - ♦ **Cuban Missile Crisis** as the defining moment; prompted first arms-control efforts.
- **Institutionalizing Control (1960s–1990s):**
 - ♦ **Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), 1968:** The cornerstone of the nuclear order — non-proliferation, disarmament, peaceful uses.
 - ♦ **Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) Negotiations:** It bans 'any nuclear weapon test explosion'. It has **never entered into force**, despite 187 signatures.
 - Key non-ratifiers: **U.S., China, Israel, Egypt, Iran**.
 - Non-signatories: **India, Pakistan, North Korea**.
- **Post-Cold War Optimism:**
 - ♦ **Declining Arsenals, Limited Proliferation:** Global nuclear stockpiles fell from **65,000 weapons in the late 1970s** to **under 12,500** currently.
 - Only about **nine states** possess nuclear weapons, far fewer than the two dozen predicted in the 1960s.
 - ♦ **Cooperative Threat Reduction** to secure loose Soviet nuclear materials.
- **US–Soviet Bilateral Treaties:** Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) I/II, Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) I/II.

Factors Undermining Global Nuclear Order

- **Collapse of Arms-Control Architecture:** US withdrawal from the **ABM Treaty (2002)**; Breakdown of the **INF Treaty (2019)**; Fragility of **New START**, the last remaining US–Russia treaty.
 - ♦ **New START**, the sole **remaining US – Russia arms control treaty**, which will **expire in February 2026** with no negotiations planned.
- **Violations, Vetoes, and Erosion of Norms:** North Korea's nuclear breakout; Iran's JCPOA instability; Lack of consensus in NPT Review Conferences; and Great-power vetoes at the UN undermining enforcement.
- **China's Rapid Arsenal Expansion:** Development of **MIRVs**, new silos, hypersonics; China's shift from **minimum to 'medium' deterrence**.
 - ♦ China's arsenal is projected to exceed **1,000 warheads by 2030**, transforming the strategic balance.
- **Russia–Ukraine War and the Nuclear Shadow:** Nuclear threats used as coercion; debates on NATO's nuclear posture; and fear of nuclear use by a conventionally inferior but nuclear-armed belligerent.
- **Technology Disruption:** AI-enabled early warning, autonomous systems, space-based sensors, hypersonic glide vehicles etc are increasing **first-strike instability**.
- **Modernization Without Explosive Testing:**
 - ♦ **Russia:** Tests of **Burevestnik** (nuclear-powered cruise missile) and **Poseidon** (nuclear-powered underwater drone).
 - ♦ **China:** Hypersonic glide vehicle tests since 2021.
 - ♦ **United States:** New B61-13 gravity bomb, W76-2 low-yield warhead, and a nuclear-armed SLCM.

- **Modern Capabilities Increase Usability:** Low-yield warheads, hypersonic delivery systems, and unmanned platforms increase the risk of early or mistaken nuclear use.
 - ♦ Missile defense expansions such as the proposed US 'golden dome' signal a new competitive cycle among nuclear states.

Cascade Effect: India, Pakistan, and Others

- If the US resumes explosive testing:
 - ♦ **China and Russia** will almost certainly follow.
 - ♦ **India** would likely resume testing to validate its thermonuclear design.
 - ♦ **Pakistan** would match India.
- Other threshold states may be encouraged to pursue weapons, unraveling existing non-proliferation norms.

India's Place in the Global Nuclear Order

- **India's Responsible Stakeholder Position:** No First Use (NFU)—though evolving debate; credible minimum deterrence; and strong compliance history despite being outside NPT.
- **India's Diplomatic Role:** Champion of **Global South perspectives** on non-proliferation; calls for universal disarmament and strategic restraint; and participation in **export-control regimes (MTCR, Wassenaar, etc.)** but **excluded from NSG**.
- **Challenges for India:**
 - ♦ Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons and unstable command structures.
 - ♦ China's arsenal growth creates a two-front strategic problem.
 - ♦ Pressure to modernize and diversify nuclear delivery systems.

Way Forward: Possible Future Pathways

- **Multipolar Nuclear Order:** Return of great-power rivalry;
 - ♦ Decentralised deterrence with more nuclear dyads and triads; and
 - ♦ Higher risk of miscalculation.
- **Rebuilding Arms Control:** Need for **US–China–Russia** trilateral frameworks.
 - ♦ Region-specific arrangements for South Asia, Middle East, and East Asia.
 - ♦ Transparency measures and crisis hotlines.
- **Technological Governance:** Limits on autonomous nuclear decision-making.
 - ♦ Global rules for AI-enabled command-and-control.
 - ♦ Restrictions on hypersonics and space weaponization.
- **Reviving Disarmament Norms:** Pressure from civil society and non-nuclear states.
 - ♦ The **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)** as a moral instrument, even if major powers stay out.

[Source: TH](#)

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] Evaluate the evolution of the global nuclear order from the Cold War era to the present day. How shifting geopolitical alliances influenced the prospects for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation?

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