

**NEXT IAS**

**DAILY EDITORIAL  
ANALYSIS**

**TOPIC**

---

**A START FOR MULTILATERALISM:  
NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION NEEDS A  
GLOBAL TREATY**

---

[www.nextias.com](http://www.nextias.com)

## A START FOR MULTILATERALISM: NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION NEEDS A GLOBAL TREATY

### Context

- Global concern over nuclear security has intensified with the **expiry of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START)** between the United States and Russia.
- It fears that the world is edging closer to a **renewed and unrestrained nuclear arms race**.

### Rising Global Threat Perceptions

- **A Shifting Security Landscape:** Global threat perceptions have risen sharply in recent years as geopolitical competition intensifies and the post-Cold War security order erodes.
  - ♦ It has amplified mistrust, accelerated military modernisation, and weakened long-standing arms-control norms.
- **Return of Power Politics: Irredentism, neo-imperial ambitions, and assertive nationalism** are once again shaping state behaviour.
  - ♦ Military force is increasingly used as a tool of coercion, while diplomatic mechanisms struggle to keep pace.
  - ♦ The resurgence of great-power rivalry has made conflict, both direct and proxy, more likely across multiple regions.
- **Nuclear Risks and Strategic Instability:** The **erosion of nuclear-arms control agreements** has significantly heightened perceptions of existential threat.
  - ♦ Nuclear-armed states like the **United States, Russia, China, Israel, and Pakistan** are expanding and upgrading their arsenals, with key treaties expiring and no credible replacements in place.
  - ♦ It has reduced transparency, weakened confidence-building measures, and increased the risk of miscalculation.
- **Regional Insecurity Hotspots:**
  - ♦ **West Asia**, where shifting alliances and latent nuclear ambitions add volatility.
  - ♦ **Eastern Europe**, shaped by war, territorial disputes, and military escalation.
  - ♦ **East Asia**, where strategic competition and arms build-ups are redefining deterrence dynamics.

### New START Treaty

- **Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty-I (START-I)** was signed between the **US and the former USSR** in 1991 and came into force in 1994.
  - ♦ It limited each side to 6,000 nuclear warheads and 1,600 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) but **expired in 2009**.
- **Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT, aka Treaty of Moscow):** It replaced the **START-I**.
  - ♦ Later, the **New START Treaty** was signed in 2010 & entered into force in 2011.
- **New START Treaty:** It caps the number of deployed strategic warheads at 1,550 on each side, with no more than 700 deployed ground or submarine launched missiles and bomber planes, and 800 launchers.

### Impact of New START's Expiry

- Its expiry removes the **last remaining bilateral constraint** on the world's two largest nuclear arsenals, which together account for **around 90% of global nuclear weapons**.
- Both countries are now pursuing **aggressive nuclear modernisation programmes**, raising the likelihood of a **rapid expansion in deployed warheads**.

### A Widening Nuclear Landscape

- According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), there are **nine nuclear-armed states** possessing a combined **12,241 warheads**, with **9,614** in military stockpiles (*January 2025*).
- Beyond the US and Russia, the **UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel** have all expanded or upgraded their arsenals.

- **India** has overtaken Pakistan with about **180 warheads**.
- **China**, with roughly **600 warheads**, has the **fastest-growing arsenal** and is **constructing hundreds of missile silos**, potentially reaching parity with the US and Russia in **intercontinental capabilities** by the end of the decade.
  - ♦ Any future arms-control framework that excludes China is therefore likely to be ineffective.

### Needs of Multilateral Mechanism For Disarmament

- **Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**: It still legally obliges its **191 member states** to pursue nuclear disarmament, while New START has lapsed.
  - ♦ The NPT review conference scheduled for **April–May** offers a critical moment for renewed commitment.
  - ♦ The growing interest in nuclear capabilities across **West Asia, Eastern Europe, and East Asia** underscores the need for a **multilateral approach** to arms control.
- **Nuclear Weapons and the Myth of Absolute Deterrence**: The possession of nuclear weapons **does not eliminate conflict**. **Low-intensity clashes**, such as those between India and Pakistan, continue despite nuclear deterrence.
  - ♦ Nuclear weapons add the **constant risk of catastrophic escalation**, especially under **hyper-nationalistic leadership** where crisis decision-making can be unpredictable.
- **Role of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), 2017**: It is the only international agreement that **comprehensively bans nuclear weapons**.
  - ♦ It provides a moral and legal framework that could support broader disarmament efforts.
  - ♦ Although nearly **100 countries have signed it, with 70 ratifications**, none of the nuclear-armed states have joined.

### Other Suggested Measures

- **Expand Arms Control Beyond a Bipolar Framework: Move past US–Russia centrism** by formally including **China** and gradually integrating other nuclear-armed states.
  - ♦ Adopt a **tiered or phased approach**, where major nuclear powers take the lead, followed by regional nuclear states.
  - ♦ Recognise **asymmetric arsenals** and allow differentiated obligations rather than one-size-fits-all caps.
- **Adopt a ‘Risk-Reduction First’ Strategy**: Given current distrust, immediate disarmament is unrealistic. Prioritise **crisis stability measures** such as de-alerting nuclear forces, **no-first-use (NFU) commitments**, clear nuclear doctrines and red-line communication.
  - ♦ Establish **nuclear risk-reduction centres** among rival blocs (e.g., NATO–Russia, US–China, India–Pakistan).
- **Strengthen Verification Through Technology**: Use **AI-assisted monitoring**, satellite imagery, and remote sensing to enhance transparency.
  - ♦ Create a **multilateral verification body** under UN or IAEA oversight, reducing dependence on bilateral trust.
  - ♦ Allow **managed access inspections** to balance sovereignty concerns with credibility.
- **Link Nuclear Arms Control to Regional Security Frameworks**: Address **regional threat perceptions**, which often drive nuclear expansion.
  - ♦ **East Asia**: link arms control to Taiwan and Korean Peninsula stability.
  - ♦ **South Asia**: integrate confidence-building with conventional-force restraint.
  - ♦ **West Asia**: revive discussions on a **WMD-free zone**.
- **Address Emerging Technologies Explicitly**: Include **hypersonic weapons, cyber interference, AI-enabled command systems, and space assets** in future agreements.
  - ♦ Prevent entanglement of nuclear and conventional systems that could cause accidental escalation.
  - ♦ Establish norms against **cyberattacks on nuclear command-and-control systems**.
- **Depoliticise Arms Control Institutions**: Insulate arms control talks from day-to-day geopolitical crises.
  - ♦ Use **Track II and Track 1.5 diplomacy** involving scientists, former officials, and strategic experts.
  - ♦ Restore arms control as a **technical security exercise**, not a bargaining chip.
- **Rebuild Strategic Trust Incrementally**: Start with **modest, verifiable steps** rather than grand treaties.

- ◆ Extend or replicate **transparency and data-exchange mechanisms** from past agreements like New START.
- ◆ Regular high-level dialogue among nuclear powers must be institutionalised, not crisis-driven.

### Conclusion: A Moment for a Fresh Start

- The **expiry of New START** is a reminder of the fragility of global nuclear restraint.
- The international community has an opportunity to push for **inclusive, multilateral disarmament talks** rather than sliding into a new arms race.
- A genuine 'fresh start' will require leadership from the principal nuclear powers and sustained global pressure to ensure that nuclear weapons do not continue to define the future of international security.

### Daily Mains Practice Question

**[Q]** Examine the need for a multilateral global treaty on nuclear proliferation and disarmament. Suggest measures to make multilateral nuclear arms control effective in the current geopolitical environment.

[Source: BS](#)

