

Nuclear Disarmament in Post-New START Era: An European View

Götz Neuneck

Chair of the Pugwash Council

On February 5, 2026, the New START Treaty, which entered into force between the United States and the Russian Federation in 2011, has finally expired. After 50 years of successful efforts to limit and reduce the gigantic nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Russian Federation, this could become a historic turning point, because there are no longer any restrictive and legally binding nuclear arms control agreements between the two major nuclear powers[1]. Both nuclear weapon states and NPT members, which possess over 90 percent of the world's approximately 12,300 nuclear warheads, are thus no longer subject to any legal restrictions on producing new nuclear warheads and expanding their operational nuclear arsenals after 35 years[2]. After the summit meeting with President Putin on August 15, 2024, President Trump did hold out the prospect of “denuclearization of the arsenals.” Since then, however, nothing has happened. On the contrary, tensions have escalated on both sides, including two hot wars are fought in which nuclear powers are involved: in the Ukraine and in the Middle East. On September 22, 2025, President Putin offered “Russia is ready to continue complying with the central quantitative restrictions of the New START Treaty for one year after February 5, 2026” if the United States does the same. To date, the White House has not responded to this offer. Both nuclear weapon states risk damaging the Non-Proliferation Treaty Regime irreversibly by violating Article VI obligation which states that “each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” Without further actions, both the US and Russia risk accelerating a nuclear arms race that ultimately cannot be won by either side, as well as the intensified continuation of nuclear proliferation.

A new nuclear arms race: New Testing? New Warheads? New technologies?

All P5 nuclear weapons states are expanding their nuclear arsenals: The US has presented costly plans to modernize and upgrade its stockpile, and President Trump has stated that the US may resume nuclear testing “on an equal basis”. His administration accused China of a low yield nuclear test in 2020. In addition, plans have been announced for an unworkable global missile defense system called “Golden Dome” that will encourage adversaries to expand their offensive

nuclear systems and can trigger an unbridled arms competition in space. Russia, in turn, is developing since years new types of nuclear weapons that are not covered by New START regulations but could be restricted by future arms control under them a nuclear-propelled cruise missile (Burestvestnik), an heavy ICBM which can transport up to ten warheads (Sarmat), a manoeuvrable hypersonic gliding warhead (Avangard) and a one-megaton underwater torpedo (Poseidon). Additionally, the People's Republic of China, which has committed itself to renouncing first use, but remains silent about the scope and purpose of the expansion and diversity of its nuclear arsenal and provides other states with arguments for expanding their armed forces. Ways to limit a nuclear competition of three actors by trilateral arms control have not been found yet.

Finally, the war in the Ukraine shifted the debate in Europe from nuclear disarmament to more nuclear deterrence. The nuclear language and signalling by Russia, which attacked the sovereign Ukraine in February 2022 and continues to fight a brutal air war against the population, has revealed a higher risk of the use of tactical nuclear weapons and emphasized the strategy of nuclear weapon states to shield conventional attacks against non-nuclear armed countries which are left vulnerable. Additionally, the demise of the 1987 landmark INF treaty which eliminated all ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5.500 km left a vacuum on restrictions on dual-capable delivery systems of INF range. Russia already deployed new INF systems such as the Oreshnik and uses conventional equipped missiles of long-range against the Ukraine. The US and Germany plan to deploy ground-based hypersonic missiles and cruise missiles with high precision in 2026 and Europe launched a programme to develop their own long-range conventional strike capability. In Europe, given considerable doubts about the US government's loyalty to the NATO alliance, a debate is underway about an independent "European nuclear force." The three European P5 Nuclear weapons states announced to increase the warheads of their smaller strategic arsenal. The announcement of President Macron at March 2, 2026 that France will increase the size of their estimated 290 warheads, but also not disclosing the size of its nuclear arsenal, introducing a new concept called "advanced deterrence" expanding the scope of deterrence beyond France itself toward a broader European role including other European states. Already in March 2021 then Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered as part of the government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy that the UK's nuclear stockpile will be raised the ceiling on from 180 to 260 warheads. Individual voices in Poland and Germany are increasingly articulated to build their own nuclear deterrent or allow to deploy forward based nuclear weapons on their territory which would end the NPT obligations of these non-nuclear weapon states. Even new NATO members Sweden and Finland are discussing the necessity of their own nuclear deterrent

strategy. The key argument is that nuclear forces are strengthening the national security, but this argument can and will be pick-up by other states to and will then lead to a new wave of nuclear proliferation in Europe or the Middle East. Following the demise of the INF Treaty and the daily use of long-range systems in the war in Ukraine, regulations are also needed to prevent a costly and dangerous offensive-defensive arms race with Russia in Europe.

The Nuclear-space connection: an arms race also in space?

There is an increased danger that the arms race also includes the space domain. In the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union have repeatedly pursued weapons programs and testing space vehicles with anti-satellite functions but have not officially permanently deployed space weapons so far due to possible destabilizing effects such as more space or threatening important early warning satellites in space which are central for nuclear deterrence. Now, major space-faring nations are obviously experimenting with technology targeting satellite services from enemy countries[3]. The United States, Russia, China and India have conducted debris-causing anti-satellite tests by direct-ascent missile defense interceptors, but also others such as Australia, France, Japan, Iran, North and South Korea and the United Kingdom are developing counterspace technologies to disrupt or destroy satellites in orbit. The current US government is also planning to erect a new space-based anti-missile defense system. In a formalized executive order on January 27, 2025 US President Trump initiated “a Golden Dome for America” to defend the US against ballistic, hypersonic and advanced cruise missiles, which he said will be “forever ending” the missile threat to the United States[4]. On May 20, 2025, he announced that \$25 billion had been allocated for a multi-layered anti-missile architecture comprising land-, sea-, and space-based interceptors and sensors[5]. Orbiting space-based interceptors are also capable of attacking and destroying early warning and communication satellites in geostationary orbit (GEO) as well as critical GPS navigation satellites. Such an approach would pose an intolerable threat to all satellites of all space-faring nations[6]. Counterreactions such as the accelerated development of their own counterspace or stealth capabilities by Russia and China are very likely.

A new multipolar arms race with strategic nuclear weapons would be heralded. Both strategic stability between the nuclear-weapon states and stability in a crisis would decline, and the dangers of an unintended use of nuclear weapons would increase. The expiration of New START is not only a bad sign for US-Russian relations, but also has significant global consequences. The nuclear non-proliferation regime, with the Non-Proliferation Treaty at its core, would be severely damaged, with the risk of an increasing number of states acquiring

nuclear weapons. The continued failure of Beijing, Moscow, and Washington to engage in good faith in arms control and disarmament negotiations constitutes a significant violation of their obligations under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and undermines its long-term viability. This is another reason why more and more states are turning to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which has now been ratified by 74 states and signed by 25 others. At the upcoming NPT Review Conference in New York, there is a risk that the treaty, which has 191 parties, will suffer irreversible and structural damage that will make the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world even more distant and nuclear disarmament impossible. The second pillar of the NPT, the non-proliferation is also under heavy strain as can be seen in the Middle East and in Europe: The military attacks against Iran and esp. on nuclear safeguarded facilities in June 2015 and since February 2016 by two nuclear armed states, the United States and the non NPT member Israel, during ongoing negotiations to bring back IAEA inspectors to Iran and to limit Iran's enrichment capabilities of blocking capabilities to develop nuclear weapons. Iran also attacked the underground nuclear facility in Dimona in Israel and Russia attacked the Ukrainian Zaporizhzhya Nuclear Power Plant which underlines an increasing risk that nuclear installation could release radioactive material. There are more voices which argue that Iran might leave the NPT causing a new wave of non-proliferation concerns. Keywords here are Iran and North Korea, but other states such as Saudi Arabia or South Korea.

In sum, the key factors of today's global rivalries are: (1) the expansion of nuclear arsenals, doctrines and threats (2) the increase of nuclear risks in ongoing wars (3) the collapse of diplomacy and arms control due to inaction and disregard and (4) new regional non-proliferation challenges and (5) the introduction of warfare changing technologies which trigger a technological arms race. All these factors are mutually reinforcing and risk the erosion of multilateral disarmament as well as global and regional security, stability and confidence building.

The coming NPT Review Conference in New York

The 11th NPT Review Conference in April/May 2026 will be very critical for the future of the treaty and global security. Two NPT review conferences in 2025 and 2022 have failed to reach a common agreement to review, reaffirm and strengthen the NPT consensus of 1995, 2000 and 2010. Another failed conference is no option ! It is the responsibility of the 191 state parties and especially the P5 nuclear weapons states to conduct good faith discussions to reach forward-looking consensus and concrete confidence building solutions to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. Everything has to be done in New York by the NPT members to protect the integrity

of the NPT. Some proposals have been made to guarantee the survival of the NPT: The following steps can help to make the security policy environment more favourable for far-reaching peace and arms control negotiations:

1. The presidents of the US and Russia declare their commitment to the central rules and limits of the New START Treaty and to begin negotiations on strategic stability and restraint. The continuation of nuclear arms control between the US and Russia with the aim of reducing the stockpiles of these states is central to further disarmament and crisis stability. Renewed recognition of the principles and rules of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Outer Space Treaty (OST) would have a significant confidence-building effect on the international community. Additionally, bi- or trilateral reduction or limitations talks will start immediately with a perspective of further negotiations.
2. The other nuclear-weapon states, China, France, and the United Kingdom, issue a declaration to limit their own nuclear arsenals to current levels if the two superpowers also make a verifiable declaration to this effect. Enhanced transparency measures and a functioning verification procedure for this would need to be established. All P5 states should agree to freeze the number of strategic launchers and negotiate a verification agreement. They can also reaffirm their commitment for the global moratorium on nuclear test explosions and strengthen the technological verification means.
3. Joint limitation measures and restraint would create a more positive environment for talks on further strategic reductions, new restrictions on medium-range missiles and tactical nuclear weapons, limitations on strategic missile defense systems, and other measures to reduce nuclear risks. This includes, above all, joint steps to mitigate the risks of integrating artificial intelligence into the nuclear command and control structure.
4. Even though the nuclear-weapon states declare that “a nuclear war cannot be fought or won,” they are not prepared to negotiate or implement steps to limit and disarm their nuclear arsenals. Renouncing first use would be a logical consequence. In view of the danger of an arms race spreading to other domains such as space and cyberspace, joint agreements between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P-5) are of great importance, also in light of new technological developments.
5. The NPT parties can pledge to refrain the use of nuclearweapons and strat negotiations on legally binding negative security assurances for non-nuclear weapon states in compliance with the NPT. Discussions for a weapons free zone of mass destruction in the Middle east should be resumed again. The adoption of the additional protocol to IAEA agreements can help to restart confidence against clandestine nuclear weapon programmes. A ceasefire

agreement with Iran must include ways to guarantee the rights of this non-nuclear weapon state for the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Notes

[1] The treaty, which was adopted in 2010 and extended for five years in 2021, allows each side to have 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed long-range missiles and bombers. Comprehensive bilateral inspections and verification arrangements have confirmed compliance with these limits until early 2023. See: Fact Sheet Arms Control

Association: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/us-russian-nuclear-arms-control-agreements-glance>

[2] Federation of American Scientists, <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

[3] Götz Neuneck (2022). “A New Arms Race in Space? Options for Arms Control in Outer Space,” *Security and Defence: Ethical and Legal Challenges in the Face of Current Conflicts*. J. C. Peña. Heidelberg / New York, Springer: p. 23-36.

[4] Presidential Actions: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/>

[5] Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Statement on Golden Dome for America, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4193417/secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-statement-on-golden-dome-for-america/>

[6] Fetter, S. and D. Wright (2025). “Can Iron Dome be transmuted into a Golden Dome?” *The Washington Quarterly* 48(2): 95-114.

About the Author



Götz Neuneck is Senior Research Fellow at the IFSH and Professor at the MIN Faculty at the University of Hamburg. He is Chair of the Federation of German Scientists (VDW) and Chair of the Pugwash Council. He is an expert in arms control, disarmament, new technologies, nuclear weapons, verification, science diplomacy, missile defense and space armament. He leads projects on new emerging technologies and the future of warfare with special emphasis on AI, autonomy and networking and the future of European Security.