

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## The Risk of a Renewed Nuclear Arms Race

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### **S***ummary*

Donald Trump's decision to resume US nuclear testing risks reigniting a competitive nuclear build-up that could destabilise international security.

President Donald Trump announced<sup>1</sup> on the Truth Social platform on 30 October 2025 that the United States will resume the testing of nuclear weapons. Trump’s social media post notes that “because of other countries’ testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis. That process will begin immediately.”<sup>2</sup> In the current volatile geopolitical environment, often shadowed by nuclear rhetoric, will Trump’s decision mark the beginning of a renewed nuclear arms race?

## The Genesis of the Nuclear Arms Race

The origins of the nuclear arms race can be traced back to August 1949, when the United States’ monopoly over nuclear weapons was broken by the Soviet Union’s first successful nuclear test.<sup>3</sup> Deep mutual distrust and ideological hostility during the Cold War created a security dilemma, compelling both powers to pursue relentless nuclear build-up. The race intensified with the testing of thermonuclear (hydrogen) bombs by the United States in 1952 and the Soviet Union in 1953—symbolising an era of extreme destructive capability.<sup>4</sup> By the mid-1980s, the nuclear arms race had reached its peak, with the global arsenal exceeding 70,000 warheads.<sup>5</sup>

However, the 1990s witnessed a period of relative calm and strategic diffusion. Key developments such as the end of the Cold War, dissolution of the Soviet Union, China and France joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (1992), the indefinite extension of the NPT (1995), and the emergence of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (1996) significantly reduced nuclear tensions.<sup>6</sup> It was during this decade that most nuclear-armed states, including the United States (in 1992), declared a moratorium on nuclear testing—marking an informal global consensus towards restraint.<sup>7</sup>

## The Strategic Logic behind Renewed Nuclear Testing

The United States’ voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing in the 1990s was shaped by a relatively stable geopolitical environment, underpinned by the Soviet Union’s disintegration and China’s participation in global non-proliferation frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> [“Trump Directs Pentagon to Test Nuclear Weapons for First Time Since 1992”](#), *The Washington Post*, 29 October 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Donald J. Trump, [“The United States has more Nuclear Weapons than any other country...”](#), *Truth Social*, 30 October 2025.

<sup>3</sup> [“Manhattan Project Background Information and Preservation Work”](#), U.S. Department of Energy.

<sup>4</sup> [“Overkill, Assured Destruction, and the Search for Nuclear Alternatives: U.S. Nuclear Forces During the Cold War”](#), National Security Archive, 22 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> [“Status of Nuclear World Forces”](#), Federation of American Scientists (FAS), 26 March 2025.

<sup>6</sup> [“Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”](#), United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA).

<sup>7</sup> [“The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty”](#), CTBTO.

However, the strategic landscape of contemporary geopolitics has undergone a significant transformation.

The most prominent determinant of renewed testing is the intensifying strategic competition among major powers—particularly Russia and China on one hand and the United States on the other—that has reignited concerns about maintaining a credible deterrent.<sup>8</sup> The United States views Russia’s testing of nuclear-powered torpedoes and cruise missiles as a direct challenge to its technological and strategic dominance. At the same time, China’s rapid modernisation of its nuclear arsenal has further compounded these anxieties.<sup>9</sup> The Russian nuclear-powered super torpedo, Poseidon, has a range of about 6,200 miles and a speed of about 185 km/h. Russia claims that the nuclear-powered Burevestnik cruise missile has a range of nearly 8,700 miles and can penetrate any defence shield.<sup>10</sup>

Simultaneously, China’s rapid nuclear modernisation through expanded intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silos, Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV)-capable missiles, and new delivery systems such as the DF-41 and JL-3 has deepened US concerns. Estimates place China’s arsenal at about 600 warheads as of 2025, with projections suggesting it could rise to 1,500 by 2035 if current trends persist.<sup>11</sup> The construction of new missile fields in Xinjiang and Gansu, along with strengthened command-and-control systems, underscores Beijing’s shift from a minimalist deterrent towards a more survivable and flexible nuclear posture.<sup>12</sup>

A second key factor is the need to ensure the reliability and performance of ageing US nuclear warheads, as decades of non-testing have raised doubts about the effectiveness of the existing arsenal.<sup>13</sup> Finally, renewed testing is also intended to demonstrate technological superiority and reaffirm American leadership in nuclear innovation, especially amid fears of falling behind adversaries.<sup>14</sup> Together, these determinants suggest that the US move towards resuming atomic testing is not merely symbolic but part of a broader recalibration of deterrence strategy in an increasingly competitive and uncertain global security environment.

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<sup>8</sup> [“Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress”](#), Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, 28 August 2024.

<sup>9</sup> [“Trump Directs Pentagon to Test Nuclear Weapons for First Time Since 1992”](#), no. 1.

<sup>10</sup> [“Russia Tested New Nuclear-powered Burevestnik Cruise Missile”](#), *Reuters*, 27 October 2025.

<sup>11</sup> [SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security](#), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI); [“Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2025”](#), *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12 March 2025.

<sup>12</sup> [“Parading China’s Nuclear Arsenal Out of the Shadows”](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 4 September 2025; [“The Nuclear Programs of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran”](#), CNA (Center for Naval Analyses), 31 March 2024.

<sup>13</sup> [“Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan”](#), U.S. Department of Energy, 3 October 2024.

<sup>14</sup> [“Why Does the United States Need a More Flexible Nuclear Force?”](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 3 April 2025.

## Implications on Global Nuclear and Arms Control Regimes

The possible resumption of US nuclear testing carries profound implications for the global arms control architecture. It risks undermining the credibility of the CTBT, which, though not yet in force, has served as a powerful normative barrier against testing since the late 1990s.<sup>15</sup> The CTBT was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1996, and it seeks to ban all nuclear explosions for both civilian and military purposes. As of 2025, 187 countries have signed the treaty, of which 178 have ratified it.

However, the CTBT has not entered into force because eight of the 44 Annex II states—China, Egypt, India, Iran, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan and the United States—have yet to ratify or sign it. The primary hesitation stems from concerns about verification, strategic balance and national security. Maintaining the option of limited testing is seen as essential to ensure the credibility and reliability of their nuclear deterrents.

A renewed American test could provide strategic justification for Russia, China and other nuclear-armed states to follow suit, thereby eroding decades of restraint and confidence. Moreover, it could weaken the NPT by signalling that leading nuclear powers are deviating from their Article VI disarmament commitments, thereby emboldening threshold states to reconsider their nuclear ambitions. Such developments would not only intensify the arms race but also diminish the prospects for future arms control negotiations, reversing the progress achieved since the end of the Cold War.<sup>16</sup>

The US decision to resume nuclear testing has profound implications for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as well. The TPNW, adopted by the United Nations in 2017 and entered into force in January 2021, represented the first comprehensive legal instrument proscribing the development, testing, possession and use of nuclear weapons.<sup>17</sup> As of 2025, the treaty has been signed by 93 states and ratified by 70. However, all nuclear-armed states, including the United States, have declined to accede to it. The United States contends that the TPNW undermines the established NPT framework, lacks credible verification provisions, and fails to account for the stabilising role of nuclear deterrence within existing security architectures and alliance commitments.

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<sup>15</sup> [“Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty”](#), no. 7.

<sup>16</sup> [“The Future of Arms Control, Strategic Stability, and the Global Order”](#), Centre for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 28 July 2022.

<sup>17</sup> [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#).

## Conclusion

US Energy Secretary Chris Wright, in the aftermath of Trump’s statement, has clarified that “the nuclear tests in question are system tests. These are not nuclear explosions. These are what we call non-critical explosions.”<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Trump’s statement has rekindled the historically anxious memories of the nuclear arms race and mutually assured destruction. The US decision to resume nuclear testing or non-critical explosions may serve immediate strategic objectives, but at the cost of destabilising the fragile global atomic order that has long sought to prevent another era of unchecked proliferation. The announcement of renewed US nuclear testing signifies more than a technical or scientific undertaking—it reflects a more profound strategic recalibration amid an evolving global power rivalry. While the United States justifies its decision as a response to the expanding nuclear capabilities of Russia and China, the move also signals a gradual erosion of the post-Cold War arms control consensus. By prioritising deterrence credibility and technological dominance, Washington risks reigniting a competitive nuclear build-up that could destabilise international security.

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<sup>18</sup> [“US Not Planning Nuclear Explosion at This Time, Energy Secretary Says”](#), *Reuters*, 3 November 2025.

## About the Author



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