

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

New START to Expire: Nuclear Arms Control Goes Up in Smoke

Ajey Lele

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Summary

With New START's expiration in February 2026, the US and Russia will have no legally binding constraints on their nuclear arsenals.

On 5 February 2026, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) will expire. This is the last remaining major treaty between the United States (US) and Russia limiting their deployed strategic nuclear warheads. It would be for the first time in over half a century that both these major nuclear powers will have no formal, legally binding constraints on their nuclear arsenals.

Would this be the death knell of nuclear arms control efforts, or could these major nuclear powers reshape the global efforts by finding an alternative to such a treaty mechanism? There are both views and counterviews on this subject, shaped by differing strategic and institutional perspectives. Whether it is seen as a setback or an opportunity depends on the context and interests of the agencies and states judging it.

The development of New START followed a largely realistic, time-bound logic, shaped by strategic necessity at the time. With the end of START I in December 2009, the US and Russia faced an immediate loss of a transparent, verifiable mechanism in the strategic nuclear domain. The absence of such a mechanism increased the risk of misperception and instability. Hence, the necessity of a mutually agreed mechanism was felt. Earlier, the George W. Bush administration was largely disinclined towards formal arms control. But when Barack Obama took office as President in 2009, a push was given for renewed nuclear engagement with Russia. As a result, talks began in mid-2009 and concluded at exceptional speed, leading to the signing of New START in April 2010. The treaty entered into force in early 2011.

The focus of the treaty mechanism was limited, possibly because the negotiation period was too short. New START prioritised the rapid restoration of verification regimes, data exchanges and confidence-building measures that had lapsed with START I. The treaty entered into force on 5 February 2011, for 10 years. Under the treaty, the US and the Russian Federation had seven years to meet the treaty's central limits on strategic offensive arms (by 5 February 2018). They were then obligated to maintain those limits for as long as the treaty remains in force.

As agreed, both states met the treaty's central limits (1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads, 700 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers, 800 total deployed and non-deployed launchers) and have remained at or below them ever since. The states were obliged to use methods such as on-site inspections, data exchanges, notifications and telemetry sharing. The treaty was extended by five years in 2021 and would expire on 5 February 2026.¹

¹ [“New START Treaty”](#), U.S. Department of State.

Conceptually, New START was intended as a stabilising interim measure, buying time for the negotiation of a more comprehensive and forward-looking arms control framework. Much was expected from the US–Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD), created in 2021 following a meeting between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin. This mechanism could have helped to warm up for future arms control. On 10 January 2022, an extraordinary session of this dialogue was held. However, since February 2022, due to the war in Ukraine, no progress has been made in this arena.²

It was decided that New START cannot be extended beyond its single five-year extension (one was given in 2021). Hence, keeping the treaty alive would require re-ratification, through securing a two-thirds majority in the US Senate. No such attempt has been made from the US side in this regard to date. An alternative would be an informal agreement to observe the treaty’s limits after its expiration, a precedent set by the 1981 US–Soviet decision to abide by the unratified 1979 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) II Treaty while negotiating START I.

In September 2025, President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would continue to adhere to New START’s limits for one year after the treaty’s expiration. Putin invited the US to do the same, with the possibility of an extension. However, President Donald Trump has stated that, “if it expires, it expires”. From the Trump administration’s side, no proposal has been put forward.³

In 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty was signed by then-US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. As per this treaty, both sides committed to eliminating their ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km, an entire class of nuclear weapons. The treaty also introduced extensive inspection measures to ensure compliance. This led to the destruction of 2,692 missiles. Despite these agreements, large nuclear stockpiles remain with Russia and the US. According to estimates, Russia has approximately 5,580 warheads, while the US maintains about 5,225.⁴

During 2019, the US initiated withdrawal from this treaty by claiming that Russia is developing the prohibited missiles. Finally, in August 2025, Russia also ended its commitment in response to US actions, such as the deployment of a Typhoon

² “[Deputy Secretary Sherman’s Participation in an Extraordinary Session of the Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov](#)”, US Mission to International Organisations in Geneva, 11 January 2022.

³ “[End of New START: Short- and Medium-Term Options](#)”, Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, 14 January 2026.

⁴ Mathew Powell, “[Russia’s Decision to Pull Out of Nuclear Treaty Makes the World More Dangerous](#)”, *The Conversation*, 6 August 2025.

missile system in the Philippines and missile drills during the Talisman Sabre exercises in Australia.⁵

Now that the New START treaty is nearing its expiration, there will soon be no legal instrument in place to control and monitor the nuclear ambitions of these states. In October 2025, President Trump announced that he had directed the US military to restart nuclear weapons testing immediately. It is also important to note that Trump is keen to expand the nuclear threat framework beyond Russia and believes that China should be included in any future nuclear arms control negotiations. China, however, has been unwilling to join such talks.

Trump 2.0 appears to have little interest in pursuing an arms control and disarmament agenda. On 7 January 2026, the US President signed a Presidential Memorandum directing the US to withdraw from 66 international organisations, including both UN and non-UN bodies, because they no longer served the US interests.⁶ This sweeping disengagement signals a conscious withdrawal from global institutions that spearhead norms, confidence-building mechanisms, codes of conduct, and verifiable treaty instruments related to arms control and disarmament.

Trump’s tariff policies, adversarial views towards NATO, Canada and Europe, interventionist approach towards Venezuela, and push to acquire Greenland all indicate an aversion to engaging in bilateral or multilateral negotiations to resolve these issues. Extending this approach to nuclear arms control matters suggests that he is unlikely to show the patience required for complex talks or to make meaningful concessions in the larger interest to keep arms control relevant. Trump is unlikely to embrace nuclear arms reduction as a tool for long-term global security. In his last year in power, Trump’s approach demonstrates a distinctly myopic vision, viewing nuclear arms reduction solely through the lens of US advantage.

As mentioned earlier, Russia has indicated a willingness to extend the New START by offering a one-year extension. This proposal appears tactical mainly. Moscow is currently heavily engaged in the war in Ukraine and faces strained relations with the West. Russia’s proposal for a short extension may be an attempt to buy time rather than finding a technically feasible solution. Russia perhaps wants the

⁵ [“Russia Officially Ends Commitment to 1987 INF Nuclear Arms Treaty”](#), News on AIR, 5 August 2025.

⁶ [“Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Withdraws the United States from International Organizations that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States”](#), The White House, 7 January 2026.

current system to continue, with a broad, faith-based understanding to signal restraint and avoid an immediate breakdown of the arms control framework.

President Putin definitely understands that the global strategic landscape has changed significantly over the last 15 years, particularly under President Trump, and that any settlement on the nuclear front is unlikely. Also, the absence of any legal regime would give him more flexibility to test his nuclear-capable missiles. Russia has already demonstrated hypersonic missile capabilities in the Ukrainian theatre. Like the US, Russia also could be keen to conduct 'non-critical' nuclear tests.

The US and Russia, with their actions (or non-actions), have put international stability and cooperative disarmament in the backseat. Overall, avoiding binding commitments under any nuclear arms limitation treaty appears to serve the strategic interests of both these states. Initiatives for strategic arms reduction, arms control, or disarmament, therefore, have been sidelined entirely.

About the Author



Group Captain (Dr.) Ajey Lele (Retd.) is Deputy Director General at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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