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CONTENTS

RESEARCH ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS

Managed Stability to Competitive Deterrence: Structural Transformation of Nuclear Order and Strategic Stability of South Asia

Aqeel Akhtar*

Abstract

The nuclear order that emerged during the Cold War is undergoing a structural transformation. For decades, international security operated under a framework of managed nuclear stability, characterized by predictable deterrence relationships supported by arms control regimes, verification mechanisms, and tacit norms of restraint. Despite their limitations, the structured arrangements collectively reduced the probability of misperception and inadvertent escalation of conflict. During this period, second-strike survivability was robustly maintained, and offensive and defensive nuclear postures remained distinguishable to the degree necessary for rational deterrence calculations. The decision timelines under crisis were sufficient to support deliberative decision-making processes. This article posits that the emergence of multipolarity, the collapse of bilateral arms control between the United States (US) and Russia, and technological disruption have produced a distinct strategic environment, termed 'competitive deterrence,' which has severely impacted second-strike survivability, distinguishability of force postures, and deliberative decision timelines. This article uses South Asia as a case study to examine competitive deterrence dynamics in their most direct form. South Asia is a nuclear flashpoint due to recurring crises and the absence of a dialogue process between India and Pakistan. India's build-up of destabilizing strategic capabilities, growing conventional asymmetries, and doctrinal modifications to seek space for war below the

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nuclear threshold constitute a critical case for testing competitive deterrence dynamics.

Keywords: Managed Nuclear Stability; Competitive Deterrence; Structural Realism; Offense-Defense Balance; Waltz-Jervis Debate; Bipolarity; South Asian Strategic Stability; Arms Control Erosion.

Introduction

On 5 February 2026, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) expired without a legally binding successor – a moment that closed decades of continuous treaty-based limits on US and Russian strategic forces.[1] The expiry of New START is an expression of the transition from a bipolar nuclear order, in which stability was structurally generated by the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) between two superpowers i.e., US and Soviet Union (Russia), to a multipolar nuclear environment, in which stability is politically constructed in absence of the structured frameworks.

This distinction between structurally generated stability and politically constructed stability is the central analytical contribution of this article. Drawing on Kenneth Waltz's structural realism[2] and Robert Jervis's offense-defense balance theory,[3] the article argues that managed nuclear stability was never primarily a product of concerted diplomatic efforts. It was a product of bipolarity; a structural condition in which two states, each possessing survivable second-strike capabilities, faced adversarial relationship, maintained a mutual interest in avoiding nuclear use, and had strong incentives to construct the institutional frameworks.

Waltz posits that nuclear deterrence remains robust regardless of the number of nuclear dyads – a concept called nuclear optimism. The logic of MAD applies whenever states possess survivable second-strike capabilities.[4] This article engages Jervis argument that stability under nuclear weapons is

[1] Aiden Warren, "New START Expired. Now What for Global Nuclear Stability?" *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, February 17, 2026, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/new-start-expired-now-what-global-nuclear-stability

[2] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 79–101

[3] Robert Jervis, "Offense, Defense, and the Security Dilemma," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, Global ed., 12th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2015), 93–112

[4] Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," *The Adelphi Papers* 21, no. 171 (1981), https://doi.org/10.1080/05679328108457394

contingent on certain conditions including second-strike survivability, posture distinguishability, and deliberative decision timelines. These conditions are not structurally guaranteed during bipolarity or multipolarity but should be used to stabilize deterrence.[5] The article argues that inherent complexities embedded in multipolarity coupled with deployment of emerging technologies are systematically challenging the conditions necessary for deterrence stability, as identified by Robert Jervis.

Three analytical arguments organize this article. First, managed stability was structurally contingent on bipolarity and the defense-dominant equilibrium[6] that bipolarity provided. Second, competitive deterrence[7] generates systemic risks that are more susceptible to inadvertent escalation.[8] Third, South Asia,

[5] Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 45

[6] Based on Robert Jervis's 1978 article 'Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,' the interaction between the Offense-Defense Balance and Differentiation (distinguishability) creates four distinct 'worlds' of stability: (1) Doubly Dangerous (offense advantage and not distinguishable from defense, where stability is very low. This is the worst-case scenario, since offensive and defensive postures look the same, states must assume the worst. Because the offense has the advantage, the 'incentive to strike first' is high. Arms races are intense and quick; (2) Security Dilemma (Defense Advantage and offence is not distinguishable). In this scenario stability is moderate since states still cannot tell if a neighbor is arming for protection or invasion. However, since defense is stronger, states can afford to wait and observe longer before reacting; (3) No security dilemma, but possible aggression (offense advantage but offense is distinguishable from defense). In this scenario stability is high because postures are distinguishable, a state can build a purely defensive force without threatening others. However, if a state does choose to build offensive weapons, its aggressive intent is clear. The danger here comes from deliberate aggression, not mutual misunderstanding; and (4) Doubly Stable (Defense Advantage and distinguishable from offense). In this scenario stability is high. It is the most peaceful scenario as states can easily signal, they are peaceful by buying defensive-only tech, and because defense is stronger than offense, there is no tactical incentive for anyone to start a war.

[7] Competitive deterrence is a concept most closely associated with James R. Schlesinger, referring to a form of deterrence in which adversaries are not locked into a stable, mutually accepted balance, but instead actively compete to gain strategic advantage within the deterrence relationship. Competitive deterrence departs from the earlier Cold War idea of relatively stable mutual deterrence (where both sides rely on assured retaliation). Instead, it assumes that states continuously seek relative advantage, not just parity, deterrence is dynamic and interactive, shaped by technological innovation, force posture adjustments, and doctrinal shift, each side attempts to undermine the credibility or survivability of the other's deterrent (e.g., through counterforce capabilities, missile defenses, or improved ISR)

[8] Kyle Balzer, "Knowing Your Enemy": James Schlesinger and the Origins of Competitive, Tailored Deterrence Strategies, Information Series No. 596 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, August 8, 2024), https://nipp.org/information_series/kyle-balzer-knowing-your-enemy-james-schlesinger-and-the-origins-of-competitive-tailored-deterrence-strategies-no-596-august-8-2024/

characterized by recurring crises is sustaining deterrence through Pakistan's nuclear signalling in the absence of Cold War-like arms control structures.[9]

The study in the first section develops the theoretical foundations of managed stability and resolves the Waltz-Jervis tension, which is the article's central theoretical problem. The second section identifies the three structural drivers of competitive deterrence while the third section assesses systemic risks. The final section applies the framework to South Asia as a critical case, deriving and testing specific predictions.

Cold War Managed Stability: Theoretical Foundations and Structural Limits

Kenneth Waltz defines that international system as anarchic structure within which state behaviour is driven not by unit-level attributes but by the systemic distribution of capabilities. Bipolarity is the most stable systemic configuration because it minimizes the number of adversarial relationships and eliminates miscalculation risks that multipolarity generates. Under bipolarity, each superpower bears the full cost of miscalculation, generating stronger structural incentives to invest in stability management.[10]

Once both superpowers possessed survivable second-strike capabilities, first-strike incentives were eliminated: no conceivable military advantage could be worth the devastating retaliation. During Cold War, treaties formalized the mutual understanding of second-strike survivability, verification mechanisms provided the information necessary for rational deterrence calculation, and hotlines ensured that miscommunication in crisis would not trigger inadvertent escalation.[11]

In *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better* (1981), Waltz extended his nuclear deterrence logic to argue that acquisition of nuclear weapons by more states is stabilizing rather than destabilizing – proliferation optimism; because the logic of MAD applies to any nuclear dyad in a condition of mutual second-strike vulnerability, regardless of the number of nuclear actors in the system.[12] The article does not adhere to Waltz's proliferation optimism logic and provides grounds for its selective dismissal.

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[9] Rajesh M. Basrur, *South Asia's Cold War: Nuclear Weapons and Conflict in Comparative Perspective* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008)

[10] Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons," 204–210

[11] Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 45

[12] Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons," 204–210

Jervis identifies three conditions for deterrence stability that Waltz's proliferation optimism implicitly assumed but never explained: second-strike survivability is robustly maintained across all nuclear dyads; offensive and defensive nuclear postures remain distinguishable to the degree necessary for rational deterrence calculation; and that decision timelines under crisis remain sufficient for deliberative choice rather than forcing pre-delegation or launch-under-warning.[13] Maintaining these conditions in a multipolar environment is highly difficult between the dyads with different doctrinal approaches and no framework of verification or communication.[14]

Jervis offense-defense theory[15] identifies two key variables that determine the intensity of the security dilemma: whether the offense or the defense has the advantage, and whether offensive and defensive postures are distinguishable from one another. Jervis observed that nuclear deterrence resting on secure second-strike capabilities produces the functional equivalent of defensive dominance. In the Cold War nuclear order, second-strike survivability ensured defensive dominance; arms control transparency, data exchanges, verification regimes, and agreed counting rules-maintained posture distinguishability to a degree sufficient for rational deterrence calculation. Hence, managed stability during the Cold War was a 'defense-dominant equilibrium' sustained by institutional transparency.

Above analysis also incorporates Schelling's perspective on coercive signalling,[16] where he argues that nuclear deterrence operates through 'the threat that leaves something to chance' such as shared understanding between the nuclear dyad that any crisis risks uncontrolled escalation, which generates mutual caution even in the absence of explicit deterrent threats. When signals are ambiguous, conventional and nuclear preparations are indistinguishable, cyber operations mimic physical attack, this escalation management logic breaks down – that the shared understanding of escalation risks should generate caution instead of generating panic and pre-emption.

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[13] Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 9; Scott D. Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation: Organization Theory, Deterrence Theory, and the Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *International Security* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994): 66–107, https://doi.org/10.2307/2539178

[14] Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995)

[15] Jervis, 'Offense, Defense, and the Security Dilemma,' 45

[16] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 45, https://archive.org/details/armsinfluence0000sche

This article posits that bipolarity contributed to managed stability because the bipolar structural environment offers strong incentives to invest in stability management that made arms control transparency achievable. Multipolarity undermines managed stability in which second-strike survivability, posture distinguishability, and deliberative decision timelines are systematically more difficult to maintain, which is further degraded by technological disruption.

Competitive Deterrence: Structural Drivers and Interaction

i. Causal Mechanism

The article's central claim that managed stability is giving way to competitive deterrence is driven by a change in polarity, the collapse of arms control structures, and technological disruption. In this section, it is argued that the interaction of these drivers has a qualitative threshold effect in the contemporary environment.[17] This is so because these drivers are undermining necessary conditions for deterrence stability such as second-strike survivability, posture distinguishability, and compressed decision-making timelines.

The change in polarity primarily works by the multiplication of adversarial relationships among dyads and dilution of stability management incentives. Waltz in his work also posits that multipolarity creates miscalculation risks, which did not occur during the bipolarity.[18] The erosion of shared information environment leads to the arms control collapse. In the absence of data exchanges required by the treaties, states make decisions about their strategic planning based on intelligence estimates that are vulnerable to collection gaps, analytical biases, and enemy deception. The worst-case planning creates force expansion which the adversaries perceive as threatening and the action-reaction cycle that occurs is beyond interruption.[19]

[17]A qualitative threshold effect describes a point in a complex system where a small, incremental change in a quantitative variable triggers a massive, fundamental shift in the nature or quality of the system itself. Jervis used this concept to warn policymakers that small, seemingly harmless actions can have catastrophic 'system effects' if they inadvertently push a situation past a threshold. It is his way of saying that 'the whole is not the sum of its parts' because the relationships between parts change fundamentally at certain levels of intensity.

[18] Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons"

[19] Steven E. Miller, "A Nuclear World Transformed: The Rise of Multilateral Disorder," *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 17–36; Linton F. Brooks, "The End of Arms Control?" *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 84–100, https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article/149/2/84/27315

Disruptive emerging technologies undermine nuclear stability by creating new vulnerabilities or possibilities for escalation.[20] Cyber capabilities are considered among the most disruptive and destructive emerging technologies, posing significant risks to strategic stability.[21] The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber into Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications (NC3) systems introduces risks of disruption and compromise, potentially leading to unintended escalation or miscalculation.[22] Attacks on space-based assets could significantly impair a state's ability to deter or respond to threats, impacting overall stability.[23] The combination of emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) with advanced conventional weapons can have a revolutionary impact on future conflicts, potentially blurring the lines between conventional and nuclear deterrence and raising the risk of escalation.[24] Hypersonic glide vehicles (HGV) undermine the defensive advantage dimension of the equilibrium by reducing decision-making time to less than the level needed to make a deliberative choice and dual-use platforms strike posture differentiability by rendering conventional and nuclear preparations physically indistinguishable. In recent times, the technological advancements have increased at a rapid pace.[25]

ii. The Multipolar Nuclear Landscape

Multipolarity multiplies the dyadic relationships that may lead to crisis. In the Cold War, the superpower crisis was bilateral and could be managed

[20] Hasan Suzen, "How Disruptive Technologies Affect Deterrence, Defense and Security," Beyond the Horizon ISSG, September 29, 2020, https://behorizon.org/how-disruptive-technologies-affect-deterrence-defense-and-security/

[21] Arms Control & Disarmament Centre (ACDC), "Emerging Technologies and their Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia," seminar report, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, March 12, 2020, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Report_Seminar_Mar_12_2020.pdf

[22] Ankit K, "Redefining Deterrence: The Impact of Emerging Technologies on Nuclear and Conventional Military Forces," *Nuclear Network*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 7,2025,https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/redefining-deterrence-the-impact-of-emerging-technologies-on-nuclear-and-conventional-military-forces/

[23] Brad Roberts, "Emerging and Disruptive Technologies, Multi-domain Complexity, and Strategic Stability: A Review and Assessment of the Literature" (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, February 2021), https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/EDT_ST2_BHR_2021.3.16.pdf

[24] Tom Sauer, "The Potentially Revolutionary Impact of Emerging and Disruptive Technologies and Strategic Conventional Weapons on the Nuclear Deterrence Debate," *EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers*, no. 91 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 2024), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/eunpdc_no_91.pdf

[25] Peter L. Hays, "Strategic Implications of Hypersonic Attacks from Space," DIACC Journal, November 6, 2025, https://doi.org/10.82498/C59P-CY28

bilaterally. In the current multipolar world, a crisis between India and Pakistan takes place within the context of great-power rivalry; a crisis on the Korean Peninsula is framed by US-China rivalry and Russian influence; nuclear dynamics in the Middle East are tied to Gulf state security concerns and great-power competition in the region. The interplay between crises cannot be managed bilaterally and it is virtually impossible to anticipate.

The period of prolonged nuclear weapons reductions has ended. US-Russia bilateral arms control has been in crisis in the past few years and has now functionally collapsed with the expiry of New START Treaty. The deterrence relationship between US-Russia and China has become more unstable. The new debates in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia regarding nuclear status, deterrence, and extended security assurances indicate that further states might reevaluate their nuclear policies.

A nuclear competition previously dominated by a bilateral dynamic of US and Russia has transformed into a more complex strategic framework, where Washington feels compelled to concurrently deterring two near-peer competitors that are increasingly demonstrating signs of coordination. The logic of integrated deterrence, which combines nuclear, conventional, cyber, space, and economic means of power to deter coercion and to control escalation in multiple arenas, has created new strategic environment. [26]

There are signs that a new qualitative arms race is emerging, with implications that are likely to be broader, more multidimensional, and possibly more dangerous than those of the previous century. The main spheres of conflict will not be limited to traditional force architectures but also encompass cyber capabilities, outer space resources, and the undersea domains. In this kind of environment, the assessment of relative advantage will become more obscured, and traditional arms control models will no longer be relevant. [27]

iii. Institutional Collapse and the Erosion of Structured Transparency

The sequential collapse of the arms control architecture eliminates the transparency mechanisms through which the defense-dominant equilibrium was maintained. New START's expiry on 5 February 2026 without a legally

[26] Michèle Flournoy, "The Three-Body Problem: The US, China, and Russia," Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, July 14, 2021, https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2869997/the-three-body-problem-the-us-china-and-russia/

[27] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2025

binding successor removes the last formal mechanism for bilateral data exchange and verification, leaving the US and Russia without treaty-mandated limits on strategic forces for the first time since the early 1970s. The 'handshake' understanding reached in Abu Dhabi days before expiry to 'observe the spirit' of New START without legal obligation,[28] verification, or defined duration illustrates the degradation from institutionalized to behaviorally contingent stability that the competitive deterrence framework predicts.

In the absence of confirmed data regarding the strength of adversary forces, the states have to operate in a way that they prepare against maximum potential strength instead of actual strength. This worst-case planning incentivizes expansion in its forces which its enemies perceive as threatening and thus creates expansion in reaction. The action-reaction cycle is no longer structurally mediated. The Yearbook 2025 by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)[29] confirms that all the nine nuclear-armed states are concurrently undertaking modernization programs, a precedent never witnessed in the post-Cold War period.

iv. *Technological Disruption*

Technology is the most consequential driver of competitive deterrence. The Cold War nuclear order defensive advantage, and the distinguishable postures (Doubly Stable) were due to second-strike survivability (defensive advantage) and arms control transparency (posture distinguishability), but new technologies are predictably driving the nuclear environment in the direction of offense advantage (Doubly Dangerous).

The Hypersonic glide vehicles under development by all the major nuclear weapon states (the US, Russia and China),[30] target the defensive advantage dimension. By compressing warning-to-decision timelines from the thirty minutes provided by traditional Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) trajectories to under ten minutes for some trajectories, they eliminate the deliberative space essential for escalation management; the time within which coercive signals can be interpreted, intentions queried, and alternatives to

[28] Xiaodon Liang, "New START Expires as US Urges 'Modernized' Treaty," *Arms Control Today* 56 (March 2026), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2026-03/news/new-start-expires-us-urges-modernized-treaty.

[29] SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2025*, 177-201

[30] Alex Carter, "Hypersonic Weapons Explained: Which Countries Have Them and Why They Matter," *Military Machine*, February 26, 2026, updated April 9, 2026, https://militarymachine.com/hypersonic-weapons-explained.

escalation identified. A hypersonic system capable of striking command-and-control nodes before retaliatory authorization introduces first-strike incentives that second-strike survivability was designed to eliminate.[31] Launch-on-warning protocols, the institutional adaptation to compressed timelines, dramatically increase the probability of catastrophic response to false alarms of the kind that Petrov's 1983 restraint[32] barely prevented within the managed stability framework.

Dual-use delivery systems destroy the distinguishability of attack postures, making it impossible to know whether the incoming attack is conventional or nuclear, and necessitating a worst-case response. The security dilemma is tempered when states can communicate the defensive nature of their postures via their capabilities.[33] Dual-use delivery platforms undermine this dynamic; for example, India's BrahMos missile is a dual-capable system whose conventional and nuclear versions look identical. A country under attack cannot know if an incoming BrahMos is carrying a conventional or nuclear warhead. This turns a potentially deliberate conventional coercive signal (an attempt to create a threat, leave something to chance, but ultimately manageable) into an accidental nuclear trigger because the receiver cannot differentiate the signal from an attack.[34]

Cyber-attacks on nuclear command-and-control systems introduce nuclear-domain effects through ostensibly sub-nuclear means, they create a range of escalation options that fall short of deliberate nuclear use. A cyber operation that is meant as signalling for coercive purposes can damage early-warning systems such that they initiate launch-under-warning protocols designed for physical attack, turning a sub-nuclear event into an accidental nuclear confrontation.[35] The path from conventional cyber operations to inadvertent nuclear escalation is now technologically possible; a new type of escalation risk for which the existing crisis management models, designed for a world in which the conventional-nuclear divide was more apparent, are ill-adapted.

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[31] Ibid

[32] Pavel Aksenov, "Stanislav Petrov: The Man Who May Have Saved the World," *BBC News*, September 26, 2013, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24280831

[33] Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution.*

[34] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence.*

[35] James M. Acton, "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War," *International Security* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 56–99, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00320

Systemic Risks: The Global Nuclear Order Under Competitive Deterrence

a) Misperception and Crisis Instability

The most obvious systemic risk of competitive deterrence is increased risk of misperception and its dire consequences. Managed stability minimised this risk through institutional transparency – treaty-based data exchanges, crisis hotlines, and strategic communication to develop mutual understanding of capabilities, intent, and red lines. Without the arms control data exchanges that once provided baseline information on adversary force status, and in an environment with a decision window shortened by three times or more, it would not be possible to manage such an episode in the same way.[36]

Competitive deterrence does not simply accelerate Cold War crisis dynamics – it alters them fundamentally. Nuclear integration with conventional, cyber, and space creates escalation not because of a state's choice to use nuclear weapons but because the separate rational actions of different actors, each following their own logic, create cascading effects. A cyber-attack on command-and-control systems, a conventional attack on a dual-use satellite, a conventional precision attack on a facility with dual conventional and nuclear uses; none of these actions is nuclear in intent, but they may still be nuclear in effect if the adversary cannot differentiate between the conventional nature of the action and the preparation for nuclear use.[37]

b) The NPT Legitimacy Crisis and Proliferation Cascades

The nuclear non-proliferation treaty's (NPT) fundamental political bargain is in its most acute legitimacy crisis since 1970. Nuclear-armed states are aggravating their stockpiles but are not disarming in line with Article VI.[38] The SIPRI Yearbook 2026 shows the systemic outcome that all the NPT nuclear-weapon states are undertaking modernization programs.

If NPT norms do not protect against nuclear infrastructure attacks - and if the NPT's implicit security guarantee to non-nuclear-armed states is inoperative -

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[36] Douglas Barrie, "Unstable at Speed: Hypersonics and Arms Control," *The Military Balance* (blog), International Institute for Strategic Studies, October 18, 2019, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2019/10/hypersonics-arms-control/

[37] Acton, 'Escalation through Entanglement.'

[38] Manuel Herrera, "What Future for the NPT?: Scenarios for the Treaty Going Forward," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 9, suppl. 1 (2026): 63–76, published online February 26, 2026, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2026.2639044

then states in conflict-prone settings have a structural incentive to pursue independent nuclear weapon programs. The lessons of Ukraine, whose 1994 Budapest Memorandum security assurances were ineffective against Russian invasion, further point in this direction across a range of potential proliferant states.[39] Iran's consideration of NPT withdrawal in response to US-Israel attacks on its nuclear infrastructure presents the most direct threat to the treaty since the North Korean withdrawal in 2003.[40] The proliferation risk generated by competitive deterrence is not theoretical; it is structural and materially reinforced by recent precedent.

c) Extended Deterrence Under Stress

Competitive deterrence creates specific challenges for extended deterrence. The credibility of a patron's nuclear deterrence posture rests on allies' perception that it is credible enough to address their threats. The US threats to abandon its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commitments have had a strategic impact on US allies. Even when there is no withdrawal, doubts about alliance commitments undermine the credibility of deterrence. In Europe, trust has been eroded because deterrence is not only a military function, but also a political one. Criticism of NATO by Washington during the recent Iran war, combined with suggestions that allies should provide support for US operations or risk reduced commitment or even US abandonment, again raised suspicions that Washington might view alliance commitments as conditional rather than binding.[41]

The fallout is not just in Europe. In the Indo-Pacific, the US redeployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery from South Korea to the Middle East during the recent Iran war disconcerted South Korea and Japan. This demonstrated that US military resources allocated to the so-called Indo-Pacific deterrence can be diverted swiftly to another conflict zone.[42]

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[39] Brian Haughton, "*Memorandum Mori*: How the Budapest Memorandum Failed to Protect Ukraine,"*CONCEPT*48(2025), https://concept.journals.villanova.edu/index.php/concept/article/view/3093

[40] Maziar Motamedi, "As War Rages, Iranian Politicians Push for Exit from Nuclear Weapons Treaty," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/28/lawmakers-push-npt-exit-as-us-israel-hit-irans-nuclear-sites-steel-plants

[41] Michael Birnbaum and Ellen Francis, "Trump vents at NATO but avoids rupture after meeting with alliance's leader," April 8, 2026, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/04/08/trump-nato-withdrawal-rutte/

[42] Robert Tait, "Why the Nato Alliance Is Not as Likely to Dissolve as Trump Makes It Seem," *Guardian*, April 11, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/11/nato-alliance-trump-threats

Similarly, Japan saw the move as a sign that the US may have commitments to multiple theatres. If resources can be shifted away from Northeast Asia in a conflict elsewhere, then extended deterrence might not be as automatic as once thought. As a result, both Japan and South Korea have redoubled debate on indigenous strike capabilities, missile defense, increased defense spending and enhanced security co-operation with regional and European allies.[43]

Strategically, uncertainty has not led to the dissolution of alliances, but it casts doubts about their stability. Doubt about the US leads allies to hedge: Europe seeks independent deterrence, while Asian allies seek better self-defense. The lasting effect is steady shift from unquestioned security towards more localized and nationally oriented security arrangements.

South Asia and Competitive Deterrence

South Asia is selected as a test case because its institutional setting is most dissimilar to the Cold War nuclear environment. It is in South Asia that the dynamics of competitive deterrence are exhibited in their purest form in the contemporary nuclear order. The India-Pakistan nuclear relationship has been defined by historical rivalry, crises and military asymmetries. While tensions persist, nuclear deterrence has so far prevented large-scale war by instilling caution on both sides, however, it has not led to sustained stability. South Asia remains a nuclear flashpoint owing to India's ultra-nationalist tendencies, hegemonic ambitions, destabilizing build-up of strategic capabilities, growing conventional asymmetries and doctrinal dichotomies to seek space for war below nuclear threshold. This section seeks to unfold the agency and limits of nuclear deterrence in South Asia and analyze triggers of instability through the prism of Jervisian offense-defense balance.

Nuclear Deterrence at Work

Nuclear deterrence has constrained major crises in South Asia even before India and Pakistan fielded operational arsenals. The 1986–87, Indian military exercise Brasstacks marked the first significant crisis in which the perceived nuclear capabilities have helped avert escalation.[44]Although neither state

[43] Philippe Mesmer and Philippe Pons, "Macron Visits Japan and South Korea, Both Worried about War in Iran," *Le Monde*, March 31, 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/03/31/macron-visits-japan-and-south-korea-both-worried-about-war-in-iran_6751980_4.html

[44] Iram Khalid, "Brasstacks Crisis 1986–87," *South Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (January–June 2012): 35–62, https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/csas/PDF/3.%20Iram%20Khalid_January-June%202012.pdf

possessed a deployable capability at the time, Pakistan's implicit signaling is widely believed as influential in crisis management. [45]A decade later, during the 1999 Kargil conflict, India's decision to confine military operations to the Kargil sector underscored the deterrent effect of Pakistan's newly demonstrated nuclear capability in May 1998.[46]

The next major crisis between South Asia's nuclear-armed rivals was the 2001-02 'Twin Peaks' standoff, which persisted for nearly eight months without escalating to a full-scale war. [47]Widely regarded as the first classic case of nuclear deterrence in the region, the episode illustrated how the prospect of nuclear use reinforced by missile tests and high-level leadership statements constrained Indian military options despite its conventional advantage.[48]

The 2019 Balakot crisis has shown the impact of nuclear deterrents on conventional escalation. India's airstrikes in Pakistan after the false-flag Pulwama attack provoked Pakistan's Operation Swift Retort. Pakistan's nuclear deterrent capped escalation, forestalling the conflict's ascent up the escalation ladder.[49]

The May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict is the latest example of deterrence in action in South Asia. India failed to achieve its stated politico-military goals during the conflict and suffered air and land operational losses. India then sought US help for a ceasefire. The threat of nuclear conflict played a significant role in Washington's decision-making, a point that President Donald Trump later alluded to.[50] In fact, on 7 May 2025, Prime Minister Modi ordered the Indian military to limit its campaign to alleged civilian targets linked to so-called terrorism and to refrain from targeting Pakistani military infrastructure. This indicates that Pakistan's deterrence strategy was working,

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[45] Michael Krepon and Liv Dowling, "Crisis Intensity and Nuclear Signaling in South Asia," in *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, ed. Sameer Lalwani and Hannah Haegeland (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2018), 197, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/InvestigatingCrisesIntensity.pdf

[46] Rabia Akhtar, ed., *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam – May 2025* (Islamabad: CSSPR-IRS, 2025), 4

[47] Alex Stolar, "To the Brink: Indian Decision-Making and the 2001–2002 Standoff," Stimson, March 11, 2008, https://www.stimson.org/2008/brink-indian-de cision-making-and-2001-2002-standoff-0/

[48] Krepon and Dowling, "Crisis Intensity and Nuclear Signaling in South Asia," 203–205

[49] Rabia Akhtar, ed., *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam* (Islamabad: CSSPR-IRS, 2025), 5

[50] Ibid

constraining India's military options by limiting escalation. This limited India's military action to a level short of full-fledged conventional war.[51]

Triggers of Instability in South Asia

Despite the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence, South Asia still experiences crises, military standoffs and coercive signaling by India. The dynamics of competitive deterrence that result in instability in South Asia are explained through the prism of Jervasian framework. This theory suggests that the conditions for a stable deterrence relationship comprise posture distinguishability, second-strike survivability and deliberative decision timelines. The absence or weakness of these conditions results in the destabilization of deterrence through misperception, crisis escalation and instability. The Pakistan-India nuclear relationship exhibits these risks.

- *Lack of Posture Distinguishability and Misperception:* The first condition of nuclear stability is posture distinguishability – distinguishing between offensive and defensive postures. Distinguishable postures enable better understanding of adversary intentions and prevent overreaction. India's ambiguous No First Use (NFU) policy, dual-capable missiles, and overlapping conventional and nuclear platforms create posture indistinguishability – fueling misperception. In a crisis, policymakers will be more likely to interpret ambiguity as hostile intentions leading to action-reaction dynamics.

- *Ambiguity Surrounding India's NFU Nuclear Doctrine and Its Consequences:* India's NFU nuclear doctrine, while seemingly designed to enhance strategic stability in South Asia, is plagued with ambiguities that affect deterrence stability. It not only erodes confidence in India's deterrent policy but also contributes to posture indistinguishability – a clear and coherent nuclear doctrine allows other states to interpret when a nuclear-armed state might use its weapons.

  India's NFU doctrine seems more like a declaratory posture than an operational constraint and is used to achieve international legitimacy as a 'responsible' nuclear weapon state.[52] Over the years, there has been a deliberate blurring of the NFU doctrine through public

[51] Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*, 6.

[52] Kumar Sundaram and M. V. Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament 1, no. 1 (February 22, 2018): 152–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1438737.

statements by senior Indian officials that depart from the official NFU posture, undermining its credibility.

In 2016, then Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar expressed doubts about the value of doctrinal restraint. Further evidence of doctrinal variation is found in former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon's claim that India 'might consider pre-emptive first strikes' if it felt an adversary was about to launch a nuclear attack.[53] This was reinforced in 2019, by Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, who stated that India had been following NFU, but 'what happens in future depends on circumstances.'[54] These statements collectively suggest India's NFU doctrine is now more ambiguous, caveated and permissive of first use than ever before.

Moreover, the disconnect between India's declaratory policy and operational force posture add to Pakistan's security challenges - India possesses the Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle (MIRVed) Agni-V (7,000+ km, MIRV-tested March 2024)[55] and the Arihant-class, Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBNs) - the third SSBN commissioned in April 2026.[56] The integration of precision delivery, active S-400 ballistic missile defense systems since 2022 and MIRV technology contribute to posture ambiguity – the means needed for assured retaliation can be used for counterforce targeting if sufficient intelligence and accuracy is present. This is the unit level 'indistinguishability problem.'[57]

In absence of trust between the two countries, any level of ambiguity may result in escalation during crisis. This forms a vicious cycle of insecurity, where perceptions of the other's intentions may result in

[53] Shivshankar Menon, Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy (Penguin Random House India, 2016), https://www.puradsimedia.com/wp-content/ uploads/2019/02/CHOICES.pdf.

[54] 'No First Use' Nuclear Policy Depends on Circumstances: Rajnath Singh,' The Hindu, August 16, 2019,https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-first-use-nuclear-policy-depends-on-circumstances-rajnath-singh/arti cle29109149.ece

[55] Maryyum Masood, "India's MIRV Development: A Latent Counter-space Capability," *Global Security Review*, September 16, 2024, https://globalsecurityreview.com/indias-mirv-development-a-latent-counter-space-capability/

[56] "INS Aridhaman: India's Third SSBN and the Dawn of Credible Sea-Based Deterrence," *CSDR Blind Spot*, Centre for Strategic and Defense Research, April 2026, https://csdronline.com/blind-spot/ins-aridhaman-indias-third-ssbn-and-the-dawn-of-credible-sea-based-deterrence/

[57] Cassandra Peterson, "The Second Coming of MIRVs," Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, May 27, 2016, https://armscontrolcenter.org/the-second coming-of-mirvs/.

accidental escalation. In South Asia, such misreadings are especially dangerous because of the legacy of historical enmities and the brittle security situation. Both countries have a fragile balance of power and misperception can easily result in crisis instability or even a nuclear conflict.

- *Offensive, War Fighting Cold Start Doctrine:* Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) is a logical and defensive response, in line with the theory of realism, whereby the growing counterforce capabilities of the materially stronger opponent threaten the survivability of strategic capabilities of the other. The Cold Start Doctrine of India and its subsequent evolution into the Doctrine of Rapid and Short (DRS) punitive strikes are examples of limited, low-intensity, sub-threshold military engagements aimed at imposing costs while avoiding all-out conflict. Pakistan has made a sound strategic choice; it has evolved its deterrence posture to maintain strategic equilibrium and prevent coercion by its adversary.

  Pakistan has continued to pursue the FSD through the logic of Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD). This strategy is designed to address existential asymmetry through opacity, centralized command and control, and signalling. FSD aims to prevent aggression along the entire spectrum of conflict - tactical, operational, and strategic - rather than pursuing escalation dominance or nuclear adventurism.[58] Pakistan has retained the interconnection between conventional and nuclear responses in its FSD strategy while retaining ambiguity regarding specific nuclear thresholds.[59] Opacity is vital to countering India's conventional superiority and threats from India's emerging limited-war doctrines.[60]Pakistan's opacity regarding declaratory nuclear thresholds is an example of prudent decision-making in conditions of vulnerability. The conventional asymmetry with India precludes

[58] Khalid Kidwai, "Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control - Keynote Address," keynote address at the Seventh IISS-CISS Workshop on South Asian Strategic Stability, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, February 6, 2020, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bInVdvk39e0

[59] Sitara Noor, "Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Evolving Challenges and Potential Opportunities for India and Pakistan," *Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2023): 72, https://strategicstudies.org.pk/index.php/strategic_studies/article/view/272/156

[60] "India's Cold Start Doctrine: Not So Ambiguous," *South Asian Voices*, February 6, 2018, https://southasianvoices.org/indias-cold-start-doctrine-not-so-ambiguous/.

Pakistan from adopting inflexible declaratory red lines that could be exploited via limited conventional warfare.[61]

- *Compressed Decision Timelines and Escalatory Pressures:* The second condition of stable deterrence is sufficient time for deliberations. Stable deterrence relies not just on weapons but also time for deliberations. It takes time to verify information, conduct deliberations and consider alternatives before making irreversible choices. In a region characterized by compressed decision cycles, Pakistan's threat perception evolves in the context of ambiguity of India's declaratory strategy and dichotomy in its developmental posture. Recent South Asian crises suggest that persistent ambiguity under these conditions heightens the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation rather than sustaining stable deterrence. [62]

- *Geographical Proximity:* Pakistan and India's geographical proximity allows missiles to reach the other side in minutes. The 2022 launch of a BrahMos missile highlights the risks of inadvertent escalation due to uncertainty and time constraints.[63] During crises, this warning time is likely to further shrink by political pressures and media hype.

  Canisterization of missile systems has shortened the preparation for launch from hours to minutes, enabling higher levels of readiness. Agni-V readiness and canisterization significantly shorten launch times from hours to minutes. These are generally more suitable to the launch-on-warning and high-alert postures of nuclear forces. In addition, Agni-V's MIRV-capable design improves strike effectiveness, allows for multiple target options, and increases its counterforce capabilities.[64] The introduction and deployment of the BrahMos missile system on land, sea and air platforms highlight India's quest for rapid, precision-strike weapon systems that have potential strategic implications. BrahMos constitutes a blurring of

[61] Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*,178

[62] Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*,170

[63] Atia Ali Kazmi, "Crisis Escalation and De-escalation in South Asia: Lessons from BrahMos Incident," *CISS Strategic View* III (Center for International Strategic Studies, March 16, 2024), https://ciss.org.pk/crisis-escalation-and-de-escalation-in-south-asia-lessons-from-brahmos-incident-ciss-strategic-view-iii-march-2024/

[64] Asma Khalid, "Agni-V Canister Launch: Facts and Implications," Modern Diplomacy, July 16, 2018, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/07/16/agni-v-canister-launch-facts-and-implications/; Missile Defense Project, 'Agni-V,' Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2016, last modified April 23, 2024, https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/agni-5/

conventional escalation thresholds, and introduces an element of uncertainty to an adversary's strategic calculus.[65] India's ready-to-use ballistic missiles onboard SSBNs significantly strains decision timelines.

Overall, these trends weaken India's NFU policies. They progressively diminish NFU credibility by facilitating flexible retaliation options, and latent first-use or first-strike capabilities under a 'time-compressed' environment.[66] This developmental shift is being complemented by India's growing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and increasing use of AI in its military strategy. Improved access to near real-time satellite imagery and sensor data enhances target identification, and shortens the decision-to-launch window.[67]

- *Counterforce targeting:* The development of precision strike capabilities makes little sense for minimum deterrent countervalue missions. India's growing trend to develop accurate and ready-use missile systems demonstrates India's eroding doctrinal commitment to minimum deterrence and a shift towards counterforce posture.[68] In nuclear dyads such as India-Pakistan, such systems risk lowering the threshold for counterforce strategies by offering decision-makers a potentially false sense of protection.[69] Consequently, these developments intensify insecurity and undermine the stability of deterrence in South Asia and forcing Pakistan to ensure nuclear survivability.[70]

  India's evolving modernization of nuclear and dual-capable capabilities should be assessed in relation to the signals it sends

[65] Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014)

[66] Akhtar, *Strategic Reckoning*,169

[67] Safia Mansoor, "India's AI Militarization: Security Repercussions for Pakistan," January 24, 2024, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/columns/military-and-security/india-s-ai-militarization-security-repercussions-for-pakistan/

[68] Iftikhar Ali and Jatswan S. Sidhu, "India's Doctrinal Modifications: Counterforce Temptations in South Asia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no. 3 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211019075.

[69] Kazmi, "Crisis Escalation and De-escalation in South Asia."

[70] Aqeel Akhtar and Sufian Ullah, "India's Sea-Based Nuclear Forces and Strategic Stability in South Asia," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2023): 54–68, https://doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2021.1961352

> regarding nuclear employment options. India is steadily developing capabilities to go beyond the requirements of counter-value targeting against Pakistan and also exploring options to target Pakistan's strategic forces.[71] Advances in ballistic and cruise missile systems, combined with AI-enabled ISR integration, point to a shift from assured retaliation toward counterforce targeting.
>
> Such developments indicate growing flexibility for pre-emptive strikes and escalation, in crisis situations. India's missile posture enhances readiness and responsiveness.[72] BrahMos, and the new hardened-target strike variants of the Agni missile series, naval and mobile launchers indicate first-strike flexibility. The canisterization of missiles like Agni-V, Agni-P and Pralay enhances readiness, enabling pre-emptive options.[73]

In context of above-stated facts, it can be summarized that in South Asia deterrence is at work, however, stable peace remains a distant possibility. India's ambiguous doctrine, dual-capable delivery systems, overlapping conventional and nuclear platforms, and evolving missile capabilities make it increasingly difficult to infer the intentions during a crisis. India's declared NFU doctrine with inbuilt caveats, technological developments, and force postures creates defense-offense ambiguity. Precision strike systems, MIRV-capable missiles, ballistic missile defense, canisterized launchers, and sea-based assets increasingly hint at India's counterforce strategy. India is also reported to be developing bunker-busting munition. Notwithstanding the development timeframe and technical hurdles, this intent accentuates instability.

South Asia is characterized by compressed decision timelines. Geography alone creates short missile flight times measured in minutes. When combined with intense media pressure, domestic political nationalism, cyber vulnerabilities, disinformation risks, and rapid military signaling, leaders may be forced to make consequential decisions under severe time stress. Modern surveillance systems, real-time targeting data, AI-assisted processing, and canisterized missile readiness further compress the interval between warning

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[71] Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 7–52, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00340.

[72] Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*

[73] Hans M. Kristensen, "India's Missile Modernization Beyond Minimum Deterrence," Federation of American Scientists, October 4, 2013, https://fas.org/publication/indianmirv/

and response. Such conditions reduce opportunities for verification, diplomacy, hotline use, or third-party intervention. Stable deterrence requires time for judgment; South Asia increasingly reduces it.

Concerns over second-strike survivability continue to drive competitive force development. If either state comes to believe that its retaliatory capability is vulnerable to pre-emption, incentives for early use, dispersal, launch readiness, or rapid escalation increase. Ballistic missile defense, precision strike systems, ISR integration, sea-based deterrents, hardened silos, mobile launchers, and counterforce discourse all affect perceptions of survivability. Whether or not these systems can technically neutralize an adversary's arsenal is less important than whether leaders believe they might. Deterrence is psychological as much as material. Perceived vulnerability can be as destabilizing as actual vulnerability.

Conclusion

The world is witnessing a structural reorganization of the nuclear order from managed stability, where the structural conditions enabled by bipolarity sustained deterrence relationships, towards competitive deterrence, where stability must be politically constructed. South Asia is the test case for the competitive deterrence framework. In a nuclear environment characterized by short geographical timelines, the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad maintains deterrence through Pakistan's unilateral restraint and improvised crisis management. Facing conventional asymmetry and concerns over limited-war concepts such as Cold Start and related rapid punitive doctrines, Pakistan's response through FSD reflects the logic of structural adaptation that strengthens deterrence across tactical, operational, and strategic levels. South Asia illustrates that nuclear deterrence can effectively prevent total war, yet it does not achieve lasting strategic stability due to India's delusional grandeur, hegemonic ambitions, its foreign policy imbued with religious dogma, and military modernization beyond its actual security needs. Since overt nuclearization, India and Pakistan have repeatedly reached dangerous levels of confrontation. The historical record indicates that nuclear weapons have imposed caution on decision-makers, constrained conventional military options, and created incentives for de-escalation once crises intensify. While nuclear weapons are likely to continue preventing all-out war, India's offensive policies, the absence of bilateral dialogue, and lack of trust may still lead to dangerous crises, inadvertent escalations, and miscalculations.

Eroding Multilateral Architecture and Nuclear Non-proliferation Regime

Husham Ahmed and Shahrukh Khan*

Abstract

The multilateral nuclear non-proliferation architecture, built over six decades through treaties, verification mechanisms, and diplomatic forums, is witnessing its most severe test. This article examines how the erosion of multilateral institutions and agreements affects the long-term viability of the non-proliferation regime. This paper analyzes the growing stress on nuclear non-proliferation norms, legitimacy, compliance incentives, safeguards credibility, and disarmament obligations. It further argues that the multilateral architecture is fading not because of external challenges but due to internal contradictions, including selective enforcement, unfulfilled bargains, and the substitution of exclusive arrangements for universal norms. The nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon) and the Conference on Disarmament (CD) are ineffective; arms control agreements have been dismantled without successors; safeguards standards have been applied selectively; and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has failed as an enforcement mechanism. These dynamics are reshaping the cost-benefit calculus that sustained nuclear restraint for the majority of states. The article explores three future trajectories, i.e., managed decline, institutional fragmentation, and renewed multilateralism. The article further identifies the conditions under which the architecture might be revived, including non-discriminatory criteria for export control membership,

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universal safeguards application, and recommitment to the foundational principles of undiminished security for all states.

Keywords: Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime, Multilateral Institutions, NPT, IAEA, Nuclear-Weapon States, Non-Nuclear-Weapon States.

Introduction

The multilateral architecture of nuclear non-proliferation, painstakingly built over six decades through treaties, verification mechanisms, and other instruments, is facing its most severe test. The very foundations upon which this architecture rests are under strain from multiple, mutually reinforcing directions. Its future can be printed in many ways, from its revival to its managed decline, depending on whether the contradictions embedded within it can be resolved before they consume the architecture's remaining legitimacy.

The aspirations for a nuclear weapons-free world are as old as the weapons themselves. The very first resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), on 24 January 1946, called for the total elimination of nuclear weapons, including weapons capable of causing mass destruction, from national armaments.[1] In 1959, the General Assembly endorsed the objective of general and complete disarmament.[2] The Final Document of the first Special Session of the General Assembly devoted to Disarmament (SSOD-I), in 1978, codified this vision, establishing general and complete disarmament under effective international control as the final objective, and recognising the elimination of nuclear weapons as the immediate goal, as well as balanced reduction of conventional armed forces and weapons based on the principle of 'undiminished security.'[3] The NPT opened for signature in 1968. This was the golden era, which saw the laying down of foundational principles and agreements. In the succeeding decades, additional instruments such as the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) and the

[1] United Nations General Assembly, *Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy*, Resolution 1 (I), A/RES/1(I), January 24, 1946

[2] United Nations General Assembly, *General and Complete Disarmament*, Resolution 1378 (XIV), A/RES/1378(XIV), November 20, 1959

[3] United Nations General Assembly, *Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly*, SSOD-I, A/S-10/2, June 30, 1978, paras. 8 and 50

Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) were negotiated, adding different layers to the multilateral nuclear non-proliferation architecture.

For the past several years, the multilateral nuclear non-proliferation architecture has been under significant stress. The nuclear-weapon states parties to the NPT have failed to implement their obligations under Article VI[4] of the treaty. On the contrary, they continue to modernise and expand their nuclear capabilities.

Arms control agreements, which led to reductions in nuclear stockpiles from their peak levels, have mostly disintegrated in recent times. Successive bilateral agreements that had once constrained the nuclear arms race have been dismantled, multilateral processes have failed to deliver substantive outcomes, and diplomatic forums set up to negotiate new legal instruments have been mired in deadlock. There is also an ongoing normative decay. Universally binding, treaty-based obligations are being sidestepped by voluntary, minilateral, and coalition-based arrangements. Export controls have been politicised, with memberships and supply decisions governed by geopolitical alignment rather than objective, non-discriminatory criteria.

These developments are taking place together with the weaponisation of new and emerging technologies. This has further complicated the strategic landscape, multiplying existing and creating new entanglement risks.

The article examines how the weakening multilateral nuclear non-proliferation architecture is manifesting. It analyses the different stress factors and also explores the likely future trajectory. The central argument of this article is that the multilateral nuclear non-proliferation architecture is eroding not primarily because of external challengers or the emergence of new threats, but because of internal contradictions, selective enforcement, unfulfilled bargains, and the substitution of exclusive arrangements for universal norms, which are progressively hollowing out the regime's legitimacy. A non-proliferation order that demands restraint from everyone while granting exceptions to the few is a regime undergoing a crisis.

[4] *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (NPT), opened for signature July 1, 1968, 729 U.N.T.S. 161, entered into force March 5, 1970, art. VI.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Architecture: Foundational Bargains

The multilateral nuclear non-proliferation architecture is built upon legal instruments, disarmament forums, export control arrangements, and other platforms.[5]

Table 1: Structure of the Global Nuclear Non-Proliferation Architecture

Strand	Type	Instrument / Body	Binding	Purpose
Legal	Treaty	NPT (1968)	Yes	Non-proliferation, disarmament, peaceful uses
Verification	Treaty-based	Comprehensive Safeguard Agreements (CSA); Additional Protocol (AP); International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)	Yes	Material accounting, inspections, and assurance against diversion
Negotiation and Deliberation	Intergover-nmental	CD; the UN Disarmament Commission (UNDC); NPT RevCons.	Partly	Negotiation and review of disarmament and non-proliferation
Enforcement	UNSC Resolution	United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1540 (2004)	Yes	Criminalisation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) proliferation acts
Export Controls	Informal grouping	Zangger Committee; Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)	No	Regulation of dual-use nuclear exports

[5] Jan Priest, *The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime: What It Is and How It Has Evolved*, paper presented at the Seminar on *IAEA Safeguards for the 21st Century*, Nuclear Training Center/KAERI, Taejon, Republic of Korea, October 18–20, 1999 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1999), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/92364/gtz08.pdf

Supplementary	Treaty	Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT-1996); Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW - 2017)	No*	Test ban; comprehensive prohibition of nuclear weapons

**CTBT has not entered into force; TPNW entered into force in 2021 but lacks participation of nuclear-weapon states.*
Source: Created by the authors

The states parties to the NPT regard the treaty as the 'cornerstone' of the global non-proliferation architecture with its three pillars: preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, promoting cooperation in peaceful applications of nuclear technology, and achieving nuclear disarmament.[6] The treaty relies on a 'grand bargain' between nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS). The NNWS committed not to acquire nuclear weapons (Articles I–II) in exchange for the recognition of their 'inalienable right' to peaceful nuclear technology (Article IV), while NWS undertook to pursue negotiations in good faith toward nuclear disarmament (Article VI).[7] The NPT Review Conferences, convened every five years, are the treaty's principal accountability mechanism.[8]

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was entrusted with the verification responsibility. Under Article III of the NPT, NNWS are required to conclude Comprehensive Safeguards Agreements (CSAs) with the Agency (IAEA), authorizing it to verify that nuclear material is not diverted from peaceful uses to weapons development. The Additional Protocol, approved by the IAEA Board of Governors in 1997 following the detection of undeclared nuclear activities in some states, expanded the Agency's verification tools to provide assurances on the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities.[9] The NWS, for their part,

[6] *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (NPT), opened for signature July 1, 1968, 729 U.N.T.S. 161, entered into force March 5, 1970, arts. I–IV, VI

[7] Andrew J. Coe and Jane Vaynman, 'Collusion and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime,' *Journal of Politics* 77, no. 4 (October 2015): 983–97, https://doi.org/10.1086/682080

[8] Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, *NPT Review Process: An Explainer* (Vienna: Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP), July 2023), https://vcdnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/web_npt_review_process_07212023.pdf

[9] International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *IAEA Safeguards: Serving Nuclear Non-Proliferation* (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 2024), https://www.iaea.org/publications/15613/iaea-safeguards-serving-nuclear-non-proliferation

concluded Voluntary Offer Agreements with the IAEA, while states outside the NPT framework entered into item-specific safeguards arrangements.

The broader United Nations (UN) disarmament machinery, established and refined through SSOD-I in 1978, was designed to operationalise the disarmament pillar of the architecture. The CD, comprising 65 member states, was designated as the single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum; the UNDC was constituted as a deliberative body with universal membership.[10] The last major product of the CD was the CTBT, opened for signature in 1996 but still not in force due to non-ratification by key Annex 2 states.[11] More recently, the TPNW, adopted in 2017 and in force since 2021, emerged not from the CD but from a separate General Assembly-mandated process reflecting the growing frustration with the established machinery's inability to deliver on disarmament.[12]

To promote compliance and control the transfer of sensitive nuclear material and technologies, voluntary export control mechanisms were established alongside the treaty framework. The Zangger Committee (1971) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (1974) are informal groupings of nuclear-technology-exporting states that, through Trigger Lists and export guidelines, attempt to regulate the transfer of dual-use items and prevent their diversion to military programmes.[13] These bodies operate with self-selected membership and no formal treaty basis.

The non-proliferation architecture was further reinforced by UNSC Resolution 1540 (2004), adopted under Chapter VII of the Charter, which imposed binding obligations on all states to enact domestic legislation

[10] United Nations General Assembly, *Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly*, SSOD-I, A/S-10/2, June 30, 1978, para. 120

[11] *Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty* (CTBT), opened for signature September 10, 1996, annexed to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 50/245, A/RES/50/245, September 10, 1996

[12] *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW), adopted July 7, 2017, A/CONF.229/2017/8, entered into force January 22, 2021

[13] Claudia M. V. Hampton, *Enforcement Through Voluntary Participation: The Impact of Non-Binding Informal Groups on the International Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime* (master's thesis, City College of New York, City University of New York, 2024), https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_etds_theses/1155/

criminalising WMD proliferation and to establish national controls over related materials and technologies.[14]

Collectively, this architecture was designed to prevent nuclear proliferation through a combination of legal prohibition, verification, institutional engagement, technology access, and supply-side controls. Security guarantees, whether through extended deterrence, negative security assurances, or collective arrangements, were meant to reduce the incentive for states to seek nuclear weapons. Equitable access to peaceful nuclear technology under Article IV was intended to ensure that non-proliferation did not come at the cost of development. The disarmament obligation under Article VI was the price of the bargain. This was the commitment that sustained the willingness of the majority to forgo what the minority possessed. Each of these mechanisms has since come under severe strain.

The Mechanics of Erosion

The strain described above is observable in several ways across every pillar of the non-proliferation architecture; i.e., paralysed institutions, fractured norms, and degraded verification credibility.

Institutional Paralysis and Accountability Failure

The NPT RevCon, its principal accountability mechanism, has failed to produce consensus outcomes in 2015, 2022, and 2026.[15] The 2026 RevCon was convened against the backdrop of the US-Iran war and faced the same structural obstacles, including the inability to agree on disarmament approaches and benchmarks, as well as deadlock over the Middle East WMD-free zone. Successive failures in recent times have transformed RevCons from instruments of accountability into rituals of managed disappointment, progressively normalising the gap between treaty obligations and state conduct.

The CD, mandated as the sole multilateral disarmament negotiating forum, has not concluded a single negotiation since the CTBT in 1996, nearly three

[14] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1540 (2004)*, S/RES/1540, April 28, 2004

[15] Daryl G. Kimball, 'NPT Review Conference Fails to Reach Consensus,' *Arms Control Association*, September 1, 2022, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-09/news/npt-review-conference-fails-reach-consensus

decades of procedural activity without a substantive outcome.[16] The CTBT[17] itself remains in limbo: opened for signature thirty years ago, it is still not in force due to non-ratification by key Annex 2 states, while recent developments, including Russia's revocation of its ratification and the US allegations against China of covert nuclear testing, have placed the de facto moratorium under renewed stress.[18]

The expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in February 2026, without a successor agreement or any prospects of negotiations in the immediate future for continued restraint, represents a watershed.[19] For the first time since 1972, there is no legally binding constraint on the world's two largest nuclear arsenals. Meanwhile, all five NPT nuclear-weapon states are modernising or expanding their arsenals. For example, France announced its first warhead increase since 1992; the United Kingdom (UK) raised its warhead ceiling; Russia is building novel categories of delivery systems; the US is deploying interceptors in outer space as part of its golden dome; and China[20] is also expanding its nuclear arsenal.[21] For NNWS parties to the NPT that accepted permanent non-nuclear status in exchange for the commitment to eventual disarmament, the bargain is now visibly unreciprocated.

Normative Fracturing: From Universal Law to Selective Arrangements

Alongside institutional paralysis, the normative foundation of the regime is fractured. Universally binding, treaty-based obligations are being displaced by voluntary, non-binding, or exclusive arrangements. The rise of

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[16] United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), 'Conference on Disarmament,' accessed June 26, 2026, https://disarmament.unoda.org/conference-on-disarmament/

[17] Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, 'Russia Revokes Ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty,' November 2, 2023, https://www.ctbto.org/news-and-events/news/russia-revokes-ratification-comprehensive-nuclear-test-ban-treaty

[18]US Department of State, 'Remarks by Under Secretary Thomas DiNanno at the Conference on Disarmament,' February 6, 2026; 'US Reveals New Details of Alleged Chinese Nuclear Test,' *Reuters*, February 17, 2026

[19] Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP), *End of New START: Short- and Medium-Term Options* (Vienna: Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, January 2026), https://vcdnp.org/end-of-new-start-short-and-medium-term-options/

[20] Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, 'Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2025,' *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 81, no. 2 (2025): 96–116, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2467011

[21]Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, 'Status of World Nuclear Forces,' Federation of American Scientists, updated March 26, 2025, https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/

'coalitions of the willing' in non-proliferation (the Proliferation Security Initiative), exclusive technology-sharing arrangements outside multilateral oversight (a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US - AUKUS), and ad hoc diplomatic groupings (the Stockholm Initiative, the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification), all represent a shift towards selective minilateralism.

The most consequential normative fracture has been the granting of country-specific exceptions in the export control arena. In 2008, the NSG granted an exception to India, a non-NPT state, whose diversion of safeguarded material had triggered the creation of the NSG[22] in the first place, without requiring full-scope safeguards, CTBT ratification, or cessation of fissile material production.[23] Subsequent bilateral nuclear supply agreements, including a uranium supply arrangement concluded as recently as 2026, have compounded the precedent. The message to the broader non-proliferation constituency is unambiguous, i.e., rules apply selectively, and strategic interests override non-proliferation standards. In the backdrop of this, the Group of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which had always played a proactive role in championing compliance with disarmament obligations, has been mired in its own internal divisions.

Safeguards Credibility Under Strain

The IAEA's safeguards system has also been facing its own tests. The IAEA was initially tasked to provide assurances against any diversion of nuclear material into peaceful uses. However, the discovery of undeclared nuclear activities in select states in 1989, 1991, and 1993 exposed a 'verification gap' in the traditional Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) framework.[24] In order to provide the IAEA with tools to assure the absence of undeclared nuclear activities in a country, the Additional Protocol (AP) was designed in 1997. It granted the IAEA expanded access and complementary inspection rights. While 183 states have concluded CSAs and 144 have agreed to APs, the application of these instruments has been

[22] John Carlson, *India's Nuclear Safeguards: Not Fit for Purpose*, Discussion Paper (Cambridge, MA: Project on Managing the Atom, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, January 2018), https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/indias-nuclear-safeguards-not-fit-purpose

[23] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, *Spokesperson's Statement on the India-Canada Uranium Supply Agreement*, March 5, 2026

[24] Mohamed ElBaradei, *The Age of Deception: Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011)

far from uniform.[25] In the case of Iran, even a CSA combined with an AP was not considered adequate, and an extensive verification regime was negotiated under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that went well beyond the CSA-plus-AP framework.

Another damaging blow to the safeguards' credibility has resulted from the lowering of benchmarks in certain exceptional cases. The umbrella safeguards agreement (INFCIRC/754), concluded by India in 2008, permitted a state outside the NPT to access the global nuclear supplies while keeping a significant portion of its nuclear program, including power reactors, its fast breeder reactors, and fissile material production facilities, outside IAEA safeguards.[26] Similarly, its AP was also weaker than those concluded by the NPT nuclear-weapon states, limited to export declarations alone, with no provision for complementary access or environmental sampling.[27] When safeguards standards are simultaneously raised for one state and lowered for another, and exceptions are designed to benefit states based on strategic geo-political considerations, the credibility of the entire system takes a hit.

Fading Structure of UNSC as a Non-Proliferation Enforcer

The UNSC has also faced paralysis on non-proliferation issues. The two most notable cases before it, Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), illustrate its limits. The JCPOA was meant to address the proliferation concerns of Iran, with the UNSC entrusted with oversight functions. The unilateral withdrawal of the US from JCPOA in 2018, the subsequent scaling back of Iranian compliance, the contested invocation of the snapback mechanism in the UNSC, and the failure to prevent military

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[25] International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *IAEA Safeguards: Serving Nuclear Non-Proliferation* (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 2024), https://www.iaea.org/publications/15613/iaea-safeguards-serving-nuclear-non-proliferation

[26] International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *Agreement between the Government of India and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards to Civilian Nuclear Facilities*, INFCIRC/754 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, September 2008), https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/infcircs/agreement-government-india-and-international-atomic-energy-agency-application-safeguards-civilian-nuclear-facilities

[27] International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *Protocol Additional to the Agreement between the Government of India and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards to Civilian Nuclear Facilities*, INFCIRC/754/Add.6 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, March 2009), https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/infcircs/protocol-additional-agreement-government-india-and-international-atomic-energy-agency-application-safeguards-civilian-nuclear-facilities

action and attack of safeguarded nuclear facilities in 2025 and 2026 divided the Council members.[28] The lesson that others may draw from this crisis is that even the most comprehensively negotiated diplomatic agreements can be unilaterally discarded by their most powerful signatories, and the costs of compliance often exceed the costs of defection.

On the DPRK, the Security Council imposed one of the most comprehensive sanctions regimes in UN history, yet it could not deter Pyongyang from the development of its program.[29] The dissolution of the Panel of Experts under the 1718 Committee, after permanent members failed to reach consensus on the renewal of its mandate, dealt a further blow to the enforcement architecture.[30]

The Calculus of Restraint: Why States Might Reconsider

Eroding Logic of Nuclear Abstention

The non-proliferation architecture rests on one simple proposition that states are better served by forgoing nuclear weapons than by acquiring them. This proposition was sustained on three interlocking assurances. First, security guarantees that would offset the vulnerability of non-nuclear status, second, equitable access to peaceful nuclear technology as a developmental dividend, and third, the promise that nuclear-weapon states would themselves disarm.[31] Each of these assurances has been progressively dishonoured, altering the cost-benefit calculus that underpinned nuclear restraint for the majority of states.

Extended deterrence in the form of the nuclear umbrella that incentivised allied states to forgo independent nuclear capabilities is itself under scrutiny. Public opinion surveys in the Republic of Korea consistently show significant support for an indigenous nuclear program. Japan's latent

[28] Anna O'Sullivan, 'The US Abandonment of the JCPOA: How Coercive Diplomacy Backfired,' *Hemispheres* 48 (December 2025), https://doi.org/10.62327/hemispheres.v48i1.8

[29] Boris Kondoch, 'The Limits of UN Sanctions under International Law: The Case of North Korea,' *Journal of East Asia and International Law* 17, no. 2 (November 2024): 369–386, https://doi.org/10.14330/jeail.2024.17.2.06

[30] Hojin Jang, 'The End of the UN DPRK Panel of Experts: Legal Continuity, Governance Breakdown, and the Emerging Role of Coalition-Based Monitoring,' *Korea on Point*, December 6, 2025, https://koreaonpoint.org/articles/article_detail.php?idx=507&start=&topic_idx=199

[31] Nobuyasu Abe, 'The NPT at Fifty: Successes and Failures,' *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 3, no. 2 (July 2020): 224–233, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2020.1824500

nuclear capability has re-entered policy discourse. In Europe, France's announcement of a 'forward deterrence' doctrine and the broader debate in other European states on strategic autonomy reflect diminished confidence in the reliability of the US security guarantees.[32] International law has also failed to deter nuclear-weapon states from attacking non-nuclear-weapon states, including in cases of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the US-Israel military strike on Iran. If nuclear-armed states are seen as willing to wage conventional wars with impunity, the deterrent value of nuclear weapons is simultaneously validated, and the restraint expected of non-nuclear-weapon states is further tested.

Furthermore, the nuclear-weapon states have failed to agree on the provision of legally binding assurances to non-nuclear-weapon states against the threat or use of nuclear weapons. There has been no progress on the issue of negative security assurances in the CD for over four decades.

Access to technology, the second pillar of the NPT, has been undermined by the uneven application of the NPT-Article IV guarantee. Despite being parties to the NPT in good standing, several non-nuclear-weapon states have faced persistent hurdles in accessing peaceful nuclear technology. In contrast, others, including one state, i.e., India, outside the treaty framework, have been granted preferential access through bilateral arrangements (Indo-US nuclear deal) driven by strategic considerations in the backdrop of evolving great power competition in the Asia-Pacific region. The 'inalienable right' to peaceful uses, which was a central inducement for nuclear abstention, is in practice mediated by exclusive supplier groups operating outside any treaty framework, with membership and supply decisions determined by geopolitical alignment rather than non-proliferation credentials.[33] The disarmament obligation, the third pillar, is the most visibly broken. The complete absence of any arms control negotiation, bilateral or multilateral, and the current practices of all five NPT nuclear-weapon states amount to a reversal of the trajectory that non-nuclear-weapon states were promised. The two largest nuclear-weapon

[32] Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *South Korean Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2024)

[33] Giovanna Maletta, Mark Bromley, and Kolja Brockmann, *Non-Proliferation, Nuclear Technology and Peaceful Uses: Examining the Role and Impact of Export Controls*, EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium Paper No. 95 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), April 2025), https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/eu-non-proliferation-and-disarmament-papers/non-proliferation-nuclear-technology-and-peaceful-uses-examining-role-and-impact-export-controls

states, the US and Russia, possessing over 90% of global nuclear arsenals, are no longer taking the expected lead role in undertaking reductions. The step-by-step approach that NWS long championed was premised on a continuing trajectory of bilateral reductions by the US and Russia; that trajectory has now been abandoned.

The Paradox of Responsible States Outside the Treaty Framework

The asymmetry in the regime's application extends beyond the NWS-NNWS divide within the NPT. Some states that never acceded to the treaty have nonetheless adopted practices that meet or exceed the non-proliferation conduct expected of treaty members. For instance, Pakistan has concluded safeguards on all civilian nuclear facilities without exception, observed unilateral moratoriums on nuclear testing, and has offered its arch-rival, India, to enter into a bilateral agreement on non-testing (to which the latter has not responded). It also harmonized its national export controls based on NSG guidelines and initiated proposals for bilateral and regional confidence-building measures (CBMS), including nuclear and missile restraint, conventional balance, and conflict resolution.[34] Yet Pakistan remains excluded from the institutional benefits of the non-proliferation architecture.

The Politicisation of Export Controls

The multilateral export control arrangements have also suffered politicization. Export control groups, particularly the NSG, were established to prevent the diversion of nuclear material and technology to weapons programs.[35] Their effectiveness depends on the consistent, criteria-based application of supply standards. When membership is instead determined by geopolitical alignment, and when the group's own guidelines are bypassed to accommodate country-specific exceptions, export controls cease to function as non-proliferation instruments and become tools of strategic competition. A non-discriminatory, criteria-based approach to supplier group membership would do more to strengthen the credibility and

[34] Shahrukh Khan, 'Technological Challenges in the Way of Nuclear Risks Reduction and Strategic Stability in South Asia,' *Science Diplomacy Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (March 2022): 23, https://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202203/t20220331_8510.html

[35] George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 293–305

effectiveness of the non-proliferation architecture than any number of political declarations.

Future Trajectories

The erosion dynamics described in this article are not self-correcting. Left unaddressed, they point toward one of three broad trajectories for the nuclear non-proliferation architecture.

Scenario A: Managed Decline

In this scenario, the NPT persists as a legal instrument but progressively loses its effectiveness. The NPT RevCons would not only fail to produce any substantive outcomes but also struggle to converge on reiterating previously agreed outcomes. The UN Disarmament Machinery, including the CD and Disarmament Commission, would remain deadlocked. No new significant disarmament negotiations would be initiated in the foreseeable future. The export control regimes would continue to face credibility-related challenges as they apply different standards selectively and along geopolitical lines.

Meanwhile, nuclear forces and capabilities would continue to expand. Extended deterrence would be offered to more states, and those who fail to receive such assurances may consider going for their own nuclear capabilities. The multilateral non-proliferation architecture would continue to face gradual but assured erosion both on the institutional and normative front.

Scenario B: Institutional Fragmentation

In this scenario, while institutions do function on a periodic basis, they fail to sustain a universal multilateral non-proliferation architecture. The non-proliferation objectives are mostly advanced through narrow coalition-style forums. Non-proliferation would become a function of alliance politics rather than international law. Technology-sharing arrangements like AUKUS would normalise the transfer of sensitive nuclear capabilities within strategic partnerships, outside multilateral oversight.[36] Supplier groups would split into rival blocs, each applying its own rules to its own members. The risk of this trajectory is that states outside any coalition or

[36] Harald Müller, 'The Future of Nuclear Arms Control,' *The Nonproliferation Review* 27, nos. 1–3 (2020): 205–219, https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2020.1834964

excluded from all of them would face both security deficits and technology exclusion, creating precisely the incentive structure most likely to drive proliferation. This could also lead to states withdrawing from the NPT and pursuing nuclear weapon programmes for their security. A 'rules-based order' in which the rules are defined by the powerful and applied to the rest is only an arrangement with diminishing consent.

Scenario C: Renewed Multilateralism

The least likely but most important trajectory to articulate is a genuine revival of multilateral non-proliferation governance. This would require several conditions to be met, each demanding political will that is currently absent, but whose articulation establishes the benchmark for responsible reform. These include, demonstrable movement by the largest nuclear-weapon states toward reducing their arsenals; the resumption of arms control negotiations in some form; the restoration of the CD as a functioning negotiating body; the adoption of objective, non-discriminatory criteria for membership in export control groups; the universal and consistent application of safeguards standards without country-specific exceptions; and the recommitment to the foundational principles of the SSOD-I Final Document including the assurance that every state has an equal right to security and that disarmament measures should ensure undiminished security for all at the lowest possible level of armaments.[37]

These trajectories are not mutually exclusive; elements of each may coexist. What will determine which prevails are developments that remain unpredictable. For instance, a resumed nuclear test by any state that would shatter the de facto moratorium; the outcome of the Iran crisis and the lessons other states draw from it; or the remote but consequential prospect of renewed great-power arms control.

Conclusion

The multilateral nuclear non-proliferation architecture is undergoing a major crisis precipitated by multiple factors, including selective enforcement of norms, unfulfilled bargains, and prioritizing narrow coalition-based interests over global objectives. This crisis is manifesting itself in various ways and most significantly through paralysis in various

[37] United Nations General Assembly, *Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly*, SSOD-I, A/S-10/2, June 30, 1978, paras. 13, 29, and 113

non-proliferation and disarmament institutions. The non-proliferation norms, long cherished, are fraying.

As a result, the states are re-evaluating their calculus of restraint and adjusting their postures accordingly, more in tune with the prevailing security landscape. The future of the multilateral non-proliferation architecture largely rests in the hands of the few who have defined and championed its initial objectives. As long as they fail to address the increasing disillusionment with the non-proliferation architecture, the vulnerability of the entire system will only increase with the passage of time. A multilateral non-proliferation order that is built on contradictions cannot be sustained and would fail to have a continued buy-in from the majority.

Whether that contradiction is resolved through inclusive, equitable reform based on implementing the foundational principles of SSOD-I or through the logic of strategic competition will determine the future of the non-proliferation project. The instruments for reform exist. What remains absent is the political will to use them.

Impact of Global Arms Control Crisis on Arms Restraint in South Asia

Nasir Mehmood and Julian Spencer-Churchill*

Abstract

The global arms control framework has eroded significantly, as landmark treaties have collapsed under intensifying great-power competition. This erosion has directly impacted South Asia, where the normative standards that once encouraged strategic restraint have considerably weakened. While India and Pakistan have never concluded formal bilateral arms control agreements, global arms control initiatives have historically established norms that indirectly shaped regional strategic behavior. India's persistent reluctance to engage in regional arms control initiatives has been the principal driver of declining strategic stability in South Asia. New Delhi has consistently resisted bilateral confidence-building measures (CBMs) and nuclear risk-reduction arrangements, foreclosing the possibility of a negotiated regional security architecture. In contrast, Pakistan has demonstrated consistent restraint by maintaining a policy of credible minimum deterrence (CMD) without engaging in destabilizing arms racing behavior. Meanwhile, India has pursued rapid and accelerating military modernization across both nuclear and conventional domains, dramatically widening the asymmetry between the two states. The operationalization of sea-based deterrents, the development of advanced delivery systems, and the acquisition of precision conventional capabilities have compounded Pakistan's security challenges. The absence of any arms control framework to manage these developments poses a growing threat to

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strategic stability in South Asia, increasing risks of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the impact of the global arms control crisis on arms restraint in South Asia and offers practical policy recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders that can be adopted by both states to establish restraint mechanisms, ultimately ensuring regional strategic stability.

Keywords: Global Arms Control Crisis, India, Pakistan, Arms Race, Strategic Stability.

Introduction

The decades-long international arms control architecture is facing its greatest crisis since the end of the Second World War.[1] The last remnants of the strategic arms control framework between the United States (US) and Russia have collapsed:[2] the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was terminated in 2019,[3] while the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) was effectively suspended by Russia in 2023, and expired on 5 February 2026 without any replacement in place.[4] The global nuclear order is now in a state of extreme ambiguity, with no legally binding limits on nuclear stocks, a dramatic decline in strategic transparency and nuclear modernization programs all ramping up at an unprecedented pace among the nine nuclear-armed countries.[5]

[1] Vladimir Orlov and Leonid Tsukanov, eds., Security Index Yearbook 2026–2027, vol. 2, Global Edition, PIR Library Series no. 40 (Moscow: PIR Center and MGIMO University, 2026), https://pircenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Security-Index-Yearbook-2026-2027-by-PIRMGIMO-Vol.2-Global-Edition.pdf

[2] Ibid

[3] Michael R. Pompeo, "US Withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019," US Department of State, August 2, 2019, https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-withdrawal-from-the-inf-treaty-on-august-2-2019/

[4] Jyri Lavikainen, "Expiration of New START: The End of Post-Cold War Strategic Nuclear Arms Control," FIIA Comment, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, February 5, 2026, https://fiia.fi/en/publication/expiration-of-new-start

[5] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Increasing Focus on Nuclear Weapons amid Heightened Escalation Risks-New SIPRI Yearbook Out Now," June 8, 2026, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2026/increasing-focus-nuclear-weapons-amid-heightened-escalation-risks-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now

All these changes take place in a geopolitical context. The breakdown of global arms control norms has reverberated in parts of the world that have long depended on the normative framework provided by arms control treaties to help them exercise strategic restraint.[6] South Asia is no exception. The region is home to two nuclear armed countries, India and Pakistan, whose bilateral relations are one of the most volatile and consequential relationships in the world.[7] South Asia has never had a formal bilateral arms control pact between Islamabad and New Delhi, but the global arms control framework in the past created normative expectations and diplomatic pressures that influenced the strategic actions of South Asian states, albeit to some extent.[8]

Over the years, the strategic landscape in South Asia has deteriorated because of this erosion of the framework. Continuous military modernization of India, whether nuclear or conventional, and the lack of willingness to take any steps towards bilateral arms control talks and CBMs with Pakistan has created an asymmetric situation which threatens the stability of regional deterrence.[9] This paper examines the linkage between the international arms control dilemma and its implications for strategic stability of South Asian region in the context of rising security threats for Pakistan and its principled position on strategic restraint.

The Erosion of the Global Arms Control Framework

The global arms control system developed over the second half of the twentieth century assuming that uncontrolled nuclear rivalry among great powers poses a threat to the survival of humankind.[10] The treaties, verification and diplomatic norms gradually developed, beginning with the

[6] Orlov and Tsukanov, Security Index Yearbook 2026–2027, vol. 2

[7] Muhammad Salman, "The Erosion of Global Arms Control and the Rising Nuclear Stakes in South Asia," Strafasia, April 10, 2026, https://strafasia.com/the-erosion-of-global-arms-control-and-the-rising-nuclear-stakes-in-south-asia/

[8] Eric Arnett, ed., *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in South Asia after the Test Ban*, SIPRI Research Report No. 14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/RR/SIPRIRR14.pdf

[9] Zafar Khan, "Growing Conventional Asymmetry between India and Pakistan," *Pakistan Horizon* 73, no. 3–4 (2020): 92, https://pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/140

[10] Mistry, Dinshaw. "Strategic Arms Limitation Talks." In *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict*, 2nd ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780123739858000106

Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) of 1963[11] and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968.[12] The three treaties of the 1970s (SALT I and II)[13] and the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty[14] and the 1987 INF Treaty[15] established a model for negotiated restraint between the nuclear superpowers. The INF Treaty was significant, since it was the first to prohibit a class of nuclear weapons: ground launched missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. It also bounded the two parties to conduct on-site inspections as a means of verification.[16]

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I, II and New START) reinforced a significant reduction in deployed strategic warheads and delivery systems.[17] The 2010 agreement, called New START, signed by Presidents Obama and Medvedev, limited deployed strategic warheads to 1,550 and deployed delivery platforms to 700, and robust transparency and verification provisions.[18] While they were far from a solution to nuclear threats, these pacts did provide a certain level of predictability, transparency and confidence in the strategic balance between the world's two major nuclear powers.[19]

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[11] Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Treaty Banning Nuclear Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water (Partial Test Ban Treaty) (PTBT)," https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/treaty-banning-nuclear-test-atmosphere-outer-space-and-under-water-partial-test-ban-treaty-ptbt/

[12] United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons

[13] Office of the Historian, "Strategic Arms Limitations Talks/Treaty (SALT) I and II," Milestones in the History of US Foreign Relations, US Department of State, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/salt

[14] Arms Control Association, "The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty at a Glance," last reviewed December 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/anti-ballistic-missile-abm-treaty-glance

[15] Arms Control Association, "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance," last reviewed August 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty-glance

[16] Arms Control Association, "INF Treaty at a Glance."

[17] Office of the Historian, "Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties, 1991 and 1993," Milestones in the History of US Foreign Relations, US Department of State, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/pcw/104210.htm

[18] Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "The New START Agreement," fact sheet, last edited February 2024, https://armscontrolcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/New-START-Fact-Sheet-Feb-2024-Edit.pdf

[19] Orlov and Tsukanov, Security Index Yearbook 2026–2027, vol. 2

In 2002, the US withdrew from the ABM Treaty, which signaled the beginning of the collapse of this framework, and it has accelerated in the past two decades.[20] The INF Treaty, known as a cornerstone of strategic stability in Europe, came to an end in 2019 when the US formally withdrew, accusing Russia of breaching its INF obligations with deployment of ground-launched cruise missile system 9M729. In response, Russia threatened to pull out as well, eliminating one of the most notable arms control achievements of the Cold War.[21]

New START experienced a similar fate. In February 2023, Russia declared that it would not attend the verification and inspection processes of the treaty anymore, a statement that was technically not legally binding but nonetheless had significant effects, removing the transparency measures which had made the treaty credible. The bilateral sharing of data and on-site inspections were stopped, which meant both sides were left without tools to build strategic confidence. While both sides formally observed the main features of the treaty - the restrictions on the number of warheads, and the delivery systems - there were no working verification mechanisms, making the commitments increasingly hollow.[22] Without a successor agreement, New START has come to an end on 5 February 2026, ending a half-century-long era of nuclear restraint between Washington and Moscow.[23]

According to SIPRI's Yearbook 2026, programs to modernize and improve nuclear arms were ongoing in all nine nuclear-armed states in 2025, with most implementing new nuclear-armed or nuclear-capable weapon systems during the year. The total global stockpile of estimated 12,187 warheads consisted of about 9,745 warheads in military stockpiles and about 4,012 warheads deployed with missiles and aircraft. More critically, the gradual reduction of retired warheads by Russia and the US, which has led to a year-

[20] Lynn F. Rusten, US Withdrawal from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty, Case Study 2, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction Case Study Series (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2010), https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/CSWMD_CaseStudy-2.pdf

[21] Pompeo, "US Withdrawal from the INF Treaty."

[22] Williams, Heather. "Russia Suspends New START and Increases Nuclear Risks." Critical Questions. Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 23, 2023. https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-suspends-new-start-and-increases-nuclear-risks

[23] Karim Haggag, "After New START Expires, Europe Needs to Step Up on Arms Control," SIPRI Essays, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, February 4, 2026, https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2026/after-new-start-expires-europe-needs-step-arms-control

on-year decline in the world's nuclear stockpile, is likely to be reversed as the rate of dismantlement slows while the deployment of new nuclear weapons increases.[24]

As risks of miscalculation and escalation increase, states are turning to nuclear arms as tools of national power, reversing a decades-long trend in decreasing the number and role of nuclear weapons, warned SIPRI Director Karim Haggag. The transition to nuclear reliance has also been accompanied by a growing problem of transparency: the level of strategic ambiguity and opacity among nuclear-armed states has increased, despite the countries' attempts to modernize and increase their own nuclear arsenal, and there is still no strategic dialogue or direct communication between some nuclear-armed states. States are 'reaching for nuclear solutions,' and thus 'creating new risks and fueling arms-race dynamics,' warned Hans M. Kristensen of SIPRI and the Federation of American Scientists.[25] The third consecutive NPT RevCon without an outcome document was a further setback for the grand bargain at the heart of the treaty, further denting the treaty's legitimacy at a time when collective action is needed on nuclear challenges.[26] The end of New START in February 2026 without any replacement agreement has lifted the final legally binding limit on deployed nuclear warheads, leaving the world with no institutionalized method to hold the stocks of the two countries containing some 83 per cent of the world's total nuclear warheads accountable. This thorough disintegration of arms control has weakened the moral imperative for all countries, even regional nuclear powers, to act with restraint, with worrisome implications for strategic stability in South Asia.[27]

Beyond the treaty mechanisms, the end of the arms control agreement between the US and Russia has far-reaching consequences for the global nuclear order. The credibility of the NPT depends on the underlying premise that the nuclear-weapon states will work towards disarmament in return for

[24] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Increasing Focus on Nuclear Weapons amid Heightened Escalation Risks," June 8, 2026, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2026/increasing-focus-nuclear-weapons-amid-heightened-escalation-risks-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now"

[25] Ibid

[26] Daniel Salisbury, "A Nuclear Order under Strain?," IISS Online Analysis, International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 16, 2026, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/06/a-nuclear-order-under-strain/

[27] Ibid

the non-nuclear-weapon states not acquiring the bomb. This bargain has been deeply compromised by the lack of a New START successor, and by the general course of nuclear modernization by all nuclear-armed nations, which has undermined the NPT and the broader non-proliferation architecture.[28] The end of New START will further undermine the NPT's effectiveness, and is likely to worsen the global challenge of proliferation, also sparking discussions in several countries regarding the strategic benefit of standalone nuclear deterrents.[29] Furthermore, the lack of arms control agreements between the two countries has left other nuclear-armed countries with less normative pressure to limit their own programs. The course of this has fundamentally complicated the global arms control landscape and paved the way for greater regional military competition.

Arms Control in South Asia: The Absence of a Formal Framework

The case of South Asia is unique and, in many ways, also distinct in the study of regional arms control. South Asia has never had a formal bilateral arms control regime between India and Pakistan like the Cold War era.[30] The two countries have witnessed three major wars (1947, 1965, and 1971) and several crises including Kargil (1999), Operation Parakram (2001-02), Balakot crisis (2019) and military conflict in May 2025.[31] Both countries have carried out nuclear tests in May 1998, declaring themselves as nuclear states, but there is no formal treaty framework to regulate their nuclear relationship.[32]

This lack of formal arms control is not the result of a lack of effort on Pakistan's part. After the 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistan actively put forth the idea of a Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) that comprised three interlinked aspects of nuclear and missile restraint, conventional balance, and mutually

[28] Haggag, "After New START Expires."

[29] Ibid

[30] Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Mapping the Prospect of Arms Control in South Asia," Stimson Center, September 6, 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/mapping-the-prospect-of-arms-control-in-south-asia/

[31] Rahul Puri, "Pakistan India War: Complete List of Indo-Pak Wars and Conflicts," Anantam IAS, last modified May 18, 2026, https://anantamias.com/pakistan-india-war/

[32] Muhammad Ans Ijaz, "Challenges to Nuclear Non-Proliferation in South Asia since 1998: A Case Study of India and Pakistan," Focus, Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad, November 2024, https://irs.org.pk/Focus/FNov24.pdf

reinforcing elements of conflict resolution.[33] The SRR proposal, tabled at the foreign minister level in October 1998, was a comprehensive Pakistani idea for a negotiated regional security architecture. India consistently refused to accept the framework.[34] The Lahore Declaration of February 1999, which had led to some bilateral CBMs, was effectively buried by the Kargil conflict that broke out a few months later.[35]

Although, there were no formal bilateral arms control arrangements in South Asia, but the arms control treaties between the US and Russia had an indirect yet significant normative impact on regional states' behavior. While India and Pakistan are not signatories to the NPT, it yet sets global standards to prohibit nuclear testing, production of fissile material without safeguards and deployment of destabilizing weapon systems. Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), which is not in force yet, had introduced a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing which both India and Pakistan have largely observed since 1998.[36] The review process of the NPT and related disarmament discussions raised diplomatic expectations and international pressure on all nuclear-armed states, including the countries that are not members to the NPT.[37]

Multilateral forums like the Conference on Disarmament (CD), as well as arms control advocacy by the major powers, also helped create a wider normative setting that limited nuclear competition in South Asia in the first two decades following the 1998 tests.[38] In Kargil, Operation Parakram and other crises, international pressure, especially from the US, influenced the

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[33] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Arms Control and Disarmament," https://mofa.gov.pk/arms-control-and-disarmament

[34] Naeem Salik, ed., Nuclear Pakistan: Seeking Security & Stability (Islamabad: Center for International Strategic Studies, 2018), https://ciss.org.pk/PDFs/Nuclear-Pakistan.pdf

[35] Amjad Abbas Maggsi, "Lahore Declaration February, 1999: A Major Initiative for Peace in South Asia," *Pakistan Vision* 14, no. 1 (2013): 187, https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/studies/PDF-FILES/Artical-9_Vol_14_No1.pdf

[36] CTBTO Preparatory Commission, "Ten Years since India and Pakistan Conducted Nuclear Tests," May 29, 2008, https://www.ctbto.org/news-and-events/news/ten-years-india-and-pakistan-conducted-nuclear-tests

[37] Adam M. Scheinman, "Review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: A Practitioner's Perspective," Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament 9, no. sup1 (2026): 20–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2026.2660915

[38] Eric Arnett, ed., *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in South Asia after the Test Ban*, SIPRI Research Report No. 14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1998), 5, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/RR/SIPRIRR14.pdf

crisis management. This pressure was tied to the overall arms control agenda adopted by the US and its desire to avoid nuclear escalation.[39] This normative pressure, along with its level of intensity and credibility, has been reduced as that agenda has been weakened.

Structural Drivers of India's Refusal to Engage in Regional Arms Control

The failure of India to hold bilateral arms control or confidence building talks with Pakistan is not incidental but embedded in the country's strategic imperatives, all of which are interrelated. First, India views its strategic position not in regional but in global terms, and states that its nuclear deterrent is not targeted at Pakistan but China, therefore any arms control agreement should be trilateral or multilateral, rather than bilateral.[40] The framing - which essentially blends Pakistan's legitimate bilateral security concerns with India's great power ambitions - is meant to deflect calls for restraint, while giving the impression of a responsible global actor.

Second, India continues to ignore the essential parity of the India-Pakistan nuclear dynamics, maintaining a hierarchy where India's nuclear posture is seen as fundamentally different from Pakistan's. Such an asymmetry has enabled India to continue with significant nuclear modernization while criticizing Pakistan's rational move as 'destabilizing' or 'irresponsible.'[41] Third, India uses the counter-terrorism angle to justify the suspension of dialogue and the development of punitive military doctrines against Pakistan.[42]

India's No First Use Policy: Eroding Credibility

Another aspect of India's arms control policy is its declared policy of No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons. This is India's declaration, but the NFU policy has been increasingly discredited by official Indian

[39] Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Understanding Kargil's Nuclear Factor: Lessons for Future Crises," *South Asian Voices*, May 27, 2019, https://southasianvoices.org/understanding-kargil-nuclear-factor-lessons-for-future-crises/

[40] Salman Bashir, "The China-India-Pakistan Nuclear Triangle: Consequential Choices for Asian Security," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5, no. 2 (2022): 336–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2141053

[41] Khan, "Growing Conventional Asymmetry," 95

[42] International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'India's Hardening Policies towards Terrorism and Pakistan,' Strategic Comments 31, no. 3 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2025.2520717

pronouncements. In 2019, former Defense Minister Rajnath Singh had indicated that the NFU commitment depended upon the circumstances and Indian strategic thinkers have been more forthright in expressing the conditions for India to consider first use.[43] The development of canisterized missiles that can be transported with mated warheads ready for immediate launch and India's sea-based deterrent program through its ballistic missile submarines make the credibility of NFU even more complicated.[44]

India's NFU policy had never been a guarantee, as declarations are subject to change and capabilities speak louder than doctrine. The policy of full spectrum deterrence (FSD) adopted by Pakistan deliberately leaves ambiguity about the nuclear threshold, which is a sensible reaction to this doctrinal uncertainty. The strategic logic of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence posture has become even more compelling than ever as India has made its nuclear policies more sophisticated and flexible.

On the nuclear front, India has also consistently refused to engage in bilateral CBMs. Previously negotiated CBMs, including the 1991 Agreement on Prevention of Air Space Violations[45] and the 1988 Agreement on Non-Attack on Nuclear Installations,[46] have not been followed by more substantive risk-reduction agreements. There are no formal agreements in place for the establishment of 'hotlines' with the National Command Authorities, joint early-warning systems or mutual notification of missile tests. A promising start was made in 1999 with the Lahore Memorandum of Understanding between the two parties to give advance warning of missile tests, but this was never pursued.[47]

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[43] Ullah, Sufian. "Conceptual Assessment of NFU – Case Study of India." *Journal of Security and Strategic Analyses* 7, no. 2: 65–90. https://thesvi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/sufian-ullah.pdf

[44] Komal Khan, "Warheads on Standby: India's Technological Leap and Doctrinal Drift," Strategic Vision Institute, October 9, 2025, https://thesvi.org/warheads-on-standby-indias-technological-leap-and-doctrinal-drift/

[45] Agreement between India and Pakistan on Prevention of Air Space Violations and for Permitting Over Flights and Landings by Military Aircraft, India-Pakistan, April 6, 1991, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1843, no. I-31419, 59, https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%201843/volume-1843-i-31419-english.pdf

[46] Agreement between India and Pakistan on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations and Facilities (India-Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement), India-Pakistan, December 31, 1988, Nuclear Threat Initiative, https://media.nti.org/documents/india_pakistan_non_attack_agreement.pdf

[47] "Memorandum of Understanding between the Governments of India and Pakistan," India–Pakistan, February 21, 1999, *United Nations Peacemaker*, https://peacemaker.un.org/en/node/9228

India suspended the Composite Dialogue Process and kept its near-total diplomatic freeze with Pakistan (only lifted during periods of severe crisis under international pressure), thereby blocking any systematic engagement on nuclear risk reduction.[48] It is not a principled adherence to arms control principles, but an intentional move to take advantage of conventional and nuclear superiority without the limitations of formal arms control discussion.

Pakistan's Advocacy for Arms Control and Strategic Restraint

Pakistan's nuclear policy since 1998 has been based on the concept of CMD, later expanded to FSD within the same rubric of CMD. The doctrine, which has been put forward in several official statements and policy pronouncements, is a strongly India-centric and defensive nuclear posture.[49] In May 1999, during his speech at the National Defence University, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had said explicitly that the fundamental pillars of Pakistan's nuclear policy are 'nuclear restraint, stabilization and minimum credible deterrence'. It has been the cornerstone of Pakistan's strategic policy ever since.[50]

The doctrine of Pakistan is based on four pillars: deterrence, not war-fighting; being defensive and India-specific; maintaining strategic stability, not superiority; and being responsive to India's strategic and conventional shifts in a calibrated way.[51] Pakistan does not seek to annihilate the enemy in the first strike, nor does it want to increase its arsenal. Instead, it aims to retain enough capacity to inflict unacceptable costs on a potential aggressor,

[48]Jawed Naqvi, "India Rejects Resumption of Composite Dialogue," *Dawn*, February 27, 2009, https://www.dawn.com/news/447005/india-rejects-resumption-of-composite-dialogue

[49] Asia Karim, Amna Mahmood, Muhammad Wajeeh Shahrukh, and Abdul Jabbar, "Transformation of Pakistan's Nuclear Posture from Minimum Credible to Full Spectrum Deterrence," *Liberal Arts & Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 6, no. 1 (2022): 92, https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/6.1.7

[50] Sitara Noor, "Pakistan's Evolving Nuclear Doctrine," *Arms Control Today* 53, no. 8 (October 2023): 12–17, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-10/features/pakistans-evolving-nuclear-doctrine

[51] Amber Afreen Abid, "Pakistan's Responsible Nuclear Posture in an Unequal Global Order," *Strategic Vision Institute*, May 4, 2026, https://thesvi.org/pakistans-responsible-nuclear-posture-in-an-unequal-global-order/

thereby dissuading both conventional and nuclear aggression at every level of the escalation ladder.[52]

Pakistan's policy of CMD/FSD despite the continuous and increasing advantage of the Indian army is an exceptional instance of strategic restraint. In fiscal year 2024-25, India's military spending totaled USD 75 billion, of which USD 20.6 billion was dedicated to arms procurement.[53] Pakistan's defence spending, on the other hand, is much less than India's in absolute terms.[54]

The military standoff between Pakistan and India in May 2025, as a result of India's Operation Sindoor, was a testament to Pakistan's restraint.[55] Despite India's unprecedented use of conventional force, including an attack on Pakistani military infrastructure, Pakistan did not resort to clear nuclear threats or nuclear signaling but responded with calibrated conventional force to restore deterrence. This is a sign of Pakistan's sincere efforts to maintain nuclear deterrence stability and its willingness to avoid nuclear brinksmanship even in the face of conventional challenges.[56]

The size of Pakistan's nuclear stockpile is around 170 warheads, which is not driven by expansionist ambitions, but instead, is maintained at the level required for credible deterrence.[57] In its Yearbook 2026, SIPRI has also reported that Pakistan is working on new delivery systems and is building up fissile material, indicating a possible modest increase in its nuclear

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[52] Ghulam Shabeer Narejo, Zulfiqar Khan, and Ahmad Khan, "Pakistan's Ambiguous Nuclear Doctrine: *Prima Facie* Deterrence Aimed at War Avoidance and India's Quest for Compellence," *Strategic Thought* 6, no. 1 (2024): 45, https://strategicthought.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/107

[53] A. K. Chawla, "Defence Budget 2024–25—An Analysis," *SP's Naval Forces*, no. 4 (2024), https://www.spsnavalforces.com/story/?id=874&h=Defence-Budget-2024-25-andmdash;-An-Analysis

[54] Statista, "India's Defense Budget Outgrows Pakistan's," May 6, 2025, https://www.statista.com/chart/17197/india-and-pakistan-defense-budget/

[55]Zahir Kazmi, "No Space for War: Marka-e-Haq and the Logic of Deterrence in South Asia," *British American Security Information Council (BASIC)*, May 20, 2025, https://basicint.org/no-space-for-conventional-war-between-india-and-pakistan/

[56] Shemin Joy, "There Was No Nuclear Signalling by Pakistan, US 'Neither Involved nor Informed' about Ceasefire: Foreign Secy Misri to Parliamentary Panel," *Deccan Herald*, May 19, 2025, https://www.deccanherald.com/india/there-was-no-nuclear-signalling-by-pakistan-ceasefire-bilateral-foreign-secy-misri-to-parliamentary-panel-3547513

[57] *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), SIPRI Yearbook 2026: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026), 45

stockpile over the next decade,[58] but that such actions should be interpreted as a responsible and measured response to India's continued nuclear expansion rather than an impulse toward an independent arms race.

Pakistan has always been a principled and consistent advocate for bilateral arms control in South Asia.[59] In addition to the proposal of Strategic Restraint Regime in 1998, Pakistan has made a number of calls for negotiations of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) [60] on a non-discriminatory basis, and has also participated actively in the Conference on Disarmament deliberations in a constructive manner,[61] and proposed mutual restraint agreements on delivery system development.[62] In addition, Pakistan has also observed the moratorium on nuclear testing since 1998 and has urged India to reaffirm and intensify its own commitments.[63]

At the multilateral level, Pakistan has been raising South Asian strategic stability issues in various international forums, highlighting the critical implications of the dangerous trajectory of India's military modernization and lack of risk reduction mechanisms. Pakistan's emphasis on the need for conventional and nuclear asymmetry to be tackled simultaneously and not separately, clearly demonstrates a degree of sophistication in understanding the escalation dynamics of South Asian security. Pakistan has also been actively engaged in the Track 1 and Track 1.5 discussions on CBMs, and is genuinely committed to negotiated management of stability.[64]

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[58] Ibid

[59] Imran Hassan, "South Asian Arms Control and Pakistan's Nuclear Diplomacy" (transcript of remarks, *International Institute for Strategic Studies* webinar, June 23, 2020), https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/events/2020/transcript-of-colonel-imran-hassan-public-webinar--23-jun-2020--south-asian-arms-control-and-pakista.pdf

[60] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Arms Control and Disarmament," accessed June 26, 2026, https://mofa.gov.pk/arms-control-and-disarmament

[61] Saif ul Haq, "Pakistan's Position on Nuclear Disarmament in the Conference on Disarmament," *Strategic Vision Institute*, June 18, 2026, https://thesvi.org/pakistans-position-on-nuclear-disarmament-in-the-conference-on-disarmament/

[62] "Pakistan Proposes 20 CBMs: Secretary-Level Talks Begin," *Dawn*, December 28, 2004, https://www.dawn.com/news/378281/pakistan-proposes-20-cbms-secretary-level-talks-begin

[63] "Pakistan Reaffirms Commitment to N-Test Moratorium," *Dawn*, June 15, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1264952

[64] Zachary S. Davis, ed., *A Different Approach: Assessing the Legacy of Track 1.5 and Track 2 Engagements with India and Pakistan* (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2025), https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-05/042925-cgsr-occasional-paper-cgsr-south-asia-occasional-paper-a-different-approach.pdf

India's Military Modernization and the Widening Asymmetry

***Nuclear Arsenal Expansion and Delivery System Development**:* The efforts towards nuclear modernization in India have gained tremendous momentum over the last decade. India is steadily building up its nuclear arsenal, with the country's estimated warhead count rising from an estimated 172 in 2024 to around 190 warheads in 2026, according to SIPRI's Yearbook 2026, which projects continued progress in the country's nuclear arsenal.[65] The Federation of American Scientists' Nuclear Notebook indicates that India is developing at least four new weapon systems and numerous new delivery platforms in all three domains - land, sea, and air.[66]

On land, India operates five types of mobile nuclear-capable ballistic missiles that are considered operational: the short-range Prithvi-II and Agni-I, the medium-range Agni-II, and the intermediate-range Agni-III and Agni-IV.[67] The Agni-Prime (Agni-P) is fully operational and undergoing structured operational testing,[68] while the Agni-V with a range of 5,000 to 8,000 kilometres, placing it firmly in the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) category, significantly extends India's strategic reach well beyond South Asia.[69] The Agni-V has already been equipped with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology, successfully flight-tested for the second time in 2026[70] following its first MIRV test, Mission Divyastra, in March 2024,[71] placing India among a

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[65] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2026: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026), 45

[66] Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, "Indian Nuclear Weapons, 2024," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80, no. 5 (2024): 326–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2388470

[67] Kristensen et al., "Indian Nuclear Weapons, 2024," 331

[68] Karl Dewey, Chelsey Wiley, and Joseph Dempsey, "On Track: India's Rail-Based Agni-Prime," *Missile Dialogue Initiative*, *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, February 4, 2026, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/missile-dialogue-initiative/2026/02/on-track-indias-rail-based-agni-prime/

[69] Monitoring Desk, "India's Agni MIRV Test Poses Threat to Global Stability, Analysts Warn," *Kashmir Media Service*, June 3, 2026, https://kmsnews.org/kms/2026/06/03/indias-agni-mirv-test-poses-threat-to-global-stability-analysts-warn.html

[70] Ibid

[71] Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "DRDO Successfully Conducts Mission Divyastra: Indigenously Developed Agni-5 Missile Makes Maiden Flight with MIRV," *Press Information Bureau*, March 11, 2024, https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2013549

small group of states with an operational MIRV-capable ICBM. An even longer-range Agni-VI, reportedly capable of exceeding 12,000 kilometres, remains in the design and development stage.[72] The development of canisterized versions of these missiles, which can be transported with mated warheads, is particularly significant: SIPRI's Yearbook 2026 confirmed that India has, for the first time, moved a portion of its arsenal into a deployed operational status, with 12 of its estimated 190 nuclear warheads now classified as deployed, either mounted on missiles or positioned with operational forces, marking a fundamental departure from India's long-standing practice of maintaining complete separation between warheads and delivery systems during peacetime.[73]

Sea-based deterrence has also advanced a great deal since the commissioning of three SSBNs: INS Arihant,[74] INS Arighaat[75] and INS Aridhaman (S4).[76] The SSBN program gives India a survivable second strike capability, thereby completing the nuclear triad. Concurrently, India is also investing in 26 Rafale Marine fighter jets to be deployed on its aircraft carriers, INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya, augmenting India's already formidable nuclear capable naval force.[77] These are qualitative improvement in Indian nuclear capability.

Conventional Military Modernization and the Cold Start Doctrine*:* The conventional military modernization of India is also of importance, given its implications for the strategic stability in South Asia. Over the past few years, India's defense procurement has seen a mix of advanced combat

[72] Newsd Staff, "India's Agni-VI ICBM Design Completed, DRDO Waiting for Government Approval," *Newsd Defence*, May 22, 2026, https://defence.newsd.in/india/indias-agni-vi-icbm-design-completed-drdo-waiting-for-government-approval

[73] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2026: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2026), 45

[74] Sushil Ramsay, "INS Arihant Fully Operational and Raring to Go," *SP's Naval Forces*, no. 5 (2018), https://www.spsnavalforces.com/story/?id=582

[75] Drishti IAS, "INS Arighat," August 31, 2024, https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/ins-arighat

[76] Siddharth Singh, "INS Aridhaman: India's Sea-Based Nuclear Deterrent Just Got Real," *Asia Times*, April 20, 2026, https://asiatimes.com/2026/04/ins-aridhaman-indias-sea-based-nuclear-deterrent-just-got-real/

[77] Adithya Krishna Menon, "India Orders 26 Rafale Marine Carrier-Based Aircraft for $7.5 Billion," *Naval News*, April 28, 2025, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/04/india-orders-26-rafale-marine-carrier-based-aircraft-for-7-5-billion/

aircraft (including the Rafale),[78] long-range precision strike systems,[79] ballistic missile defense systems acquired from Russia (S-400) and from internal programs,[80] and advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) systems.[81] The Global Firepower Ranking 2026 reveals that India has the fourth strongest military in the world,[82] highlighting a tremendous conventional imbalance between India and Pakistan.

This modernization has doctrinal implications that are encapsulated in India's Cold Start Doctrine, also known as the 'Proactive Strategy' in Indian military planning. CSD envisions the rapid mobilization of Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs), small combined arms units that could launch offensive operations within 48–72 hours of the political order, and pursue limited territorial objectives within the Pakistani territory before Pakistan can mobilize nuclear forces or before international intervention can take place. The doctrine is clearly intended to be used in an environment below Pakistan's nuclear threshold and to capitalize on conventional advantage for compellence without nuclear escalation. In October 2025, India also held a set of exercises related to drones and counter-drones that were explicitly based on the Cold Start doctrine, showing that it remains relevant in operations.

Cold Start represents a fundamental challenge to strategic stability for two interrelated reasons. First, it decreases the warning time and decision margin of the Pakistani leadership in crises, which increases the likelihood of unintended escalation and miscalculation. Second, it is designed to exploit the space between Pakistan's conventional and nuclear thresholds - a space that, in Pakistan's strategic calculus, should not exist, since any large-scale conventional aggression against Pakistan's territory constitutes

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[78] Ibid

[79] "India Tests 1,000km Long-Range Cruise Missile, DRDO's LRLACM Alters Indo-Pacific Strike Balance," *Defence Security Asia*, June 16, 2026, https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/india-lrlacm-cruise-missile-test-drdo-1000km-long-range-strike-indo-pacific/

[80] "India's Massive S-400 Missile Shield Expansion Signals New Indo-Pacific Airpower Balance against China and Pakistan," *Defence Security Asia*, June 19, 2026, https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/india-s400-missile-defence-expansion-russia-airpower-deterrence-china-pakistan/

[81] Amjad Mahmood and Adil Sultan, "Impact of India's ISR Capabilities on South Asian Security Dynamics," *Strategic Studies* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 20, https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.041.04.0040

[82] GlobalFirepower.com, "2026 World Military Strength Rankings," https://www.globalfirepower.com/

an existential threat that must be deterred. India's Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan, after Operation Sindoor in May 2025, made an unequivocal statement that the operation created 'space' for conventional war under nuclear threshold, which Pakistan sees as highly destabilizing and as proof of India's intent to undermine the deterrence stability in the region.

Ballistic Missile Defense System*:* Another layer of strategic imbalance is added with India's purchase of the Russian S-400 Triumf surface-to-air missile system and its own efforts to build the country's indigenous ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities. Ballistic missile defense systems are purportedly defensive but can erode the opponent's confidence in the second-strike capability, resulting in an increase in the number of missiles in the opponent's arsenal.

India's military modernization, its nuclearization, its procurement of BMDs, and its Cold Start doctrines are specifically designed to give India the room to resort to limited war without crossing the nuclear threshold and to enhance India's coercive options against Pakistan. These developments systematically affect the security perceptions of Pakistan and compel Pakistan to act accordingly and take measures such as the development of short-range systems, sea-based deterrents, etc. to retain the credibility of its deterrent and restore strategic balance. Hence, the responses of Pakistan are not competitive but restorative and reactive. Without an arms control framework to manage this Indian-driven spiral, the risk of miscalculation and escalation is likely to deepen as India continues to develop more sophisticated and capable offensive military forces explicitly oriented towards Pakistan.

Implications for Strategic Stability in South Asia

India's nuclear and conventional modernization, its adoption of the offensive doctrine of the 'Cold Start,'[83] and a lack of bilateral arms control or CBMs, along with the failure of the global arms control framework that was once exerting normative pressure for restraint, have created conditions conducive to the erosion of deterrence stability in South Asia. Deterrence

[83] Jaganath Sankaran, "The Enduring Power of Bad Ideas: 'Cold Start' and Battlefield Nuclear Weapons in South Asia," *Arms Control Today* 44, no. 9 (November 2014), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014-11/features/enduring-power-bad-ideas-cold-start-and-battlefield-nuclear-weapons-south-asia

stability depends on mutual confidence in the survivability of their second strike forces, the availability of communication lines and de-escalation processes in the event of a crisis, and neither side believing that it has an obvious first-strike advantage. All of these conditions are simultaneously being eroded.[84]

Though nominally committed to NFU, fears are being raised about India's development of canisterized, road-mobile missiles and its acquisition of MIRV capability, which could indicate a transition toward a more ready, first-use-capable posture. The strategic landscape in South Asia would be transformed if India could launch missiles in launch-ready configurations, armed with mated warheads (which canisterized systems can carry), then timescales of decision-making would shorten, and space for crisis management would diminish. In this regard, Pakistan has strategically designed its own deterrence, such as the Nasr short-range nuclear-capable ballistic missile for tactical deterrence and the Babur-3 cruise missile for sea-based deterrence. These are not aggressive acts but prudent responses to a real and growing threat.

The India-Pakistan conflict of May 2025 was a reminder of how this situation can escalate. India used the false flag terrorist attack in Pahalgam in April 2025 as an excuse and escalated the situation, culminating in direct military exchanges such as Indian airstrikes on Pakistani territory, drone attacks, and retaliatory conventional military operations by Pakistan. During the confrontation, strikes on key military facilities could have escalated into a nuclear crisis.[85] The crisis proved that in an era of new technologies, misinformation, and quick decision-making cycles, risks can escalate quickly in nuclear-armed competitions. Overall, the role of the international community, in particular the United States,[86] was crucial in preventing further escalation, but ad hoc third-party crisis management is not a substitute for institutional risk-reduction mechanisms.

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[84] Antoine Levesques, Desmond Bowen, and John H. Gill, *Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021), https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/nuclear-deterrence-and-stability-in-south-asia---perceptions-and-realities.pdf

[85] Christopher Clary, "Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025," *Stimson Center*, May 28, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/

[86] Muskaan Mujahid, "The 2025 Pakistan-India Conflict—as It Happened," *Dawn*, May 6, 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/1996978

There were no direct hotlines between the National Command Authorities, no agreed protocols for communicating in crisis, and no joint early-warning mechanisms in place, increasing the chances of miscalculation during this confrontation in 2025. These are exactly the sort of loopholes an effective bilateral arms control and CBM regime might cover. The fact that South Asia came as close as it did to a nuclear crisis in May 2025, in the absence of any such framework, is a testament to the urgency of establishing one.

In the long term, the future of strategic stability in the South Asian region is extremely worrisome. India's nuclear stockpile is likely to continue expanding with the Agni missile development program, the expansion of the SSBN fleet, and the possible deployment of MIRV-capable delivery systems. The conventional superiority of India is being strengthened over time by continuous high defense spending. Normative and diplomatic pressures promoting restraint have been reduced by the global arms control crisis.[87]

It was one of the most precarious years in the history of the global arms control system since the end of the Cold War, when institutions were paralyzing, militarization was increasing, and trust in international arms control was vanishing. This international situation is not conducive to strategic stability in South Asia. It establishes an environment that allows India to avoid the international condemnation it would otherwise attract for its military actions and reduces the need for bilateral dialogue that is necessary for strategic stability.

Policy Recommendations

i. ***Renewing the Call for a Strategic Restraint Regime:*** The immediate need for South Asian strategic stability is to resume substantive dialogue between India and Pakistan on the building of a Strategic Restraint Regime. Pakistan's 1998 proposal[88] remains a viable and holistic option, calling for mutually connected steps in nuclear and missile restraint, conventional balance, and conflict resolution. The international community should actively urge India

[87] Muhammad Salman, "When Arms Control Erodes: South Asia's Rising Nuclear Stakes," *Modern Diplomacy*, April 11, 2026, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/04/11/when-arms-control-erodes-south-asias-rising-nuclear-stakes/

[88] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Arms Control and Disarmament," https://mofa.gov.pk/arms-control-and-disarmament

to participate in this framework, as bilateral arms control in the South Asia region is not only a regional issue, but a global nuclear security issue.

ii. ***Confidence-Building Measures and Nuclear Risk Reduction:*** A package of bilateral CBMs and nuclear risk-reduction measures should be prioritized as an immediate step if comprehensive arms control is not realized. This package should include the establishment of a direct hotline between the military leaderships of both countries; the formalization and expansion of the Agreement on Pre-Notification of Missile Tests to cover all categories of nuclear-capable delivery system tests; agreement on mutual restraint in the deployment of ballistic missile defence systems; and the establishment of a joint nuclear risk-reduction centre modelled on Cold War US-Soviet precedents.[89] These actions do not need to be driven by a settlement of other political issues, and can be carried out alongside wider diplomatic efforts.

iii. ***International Engagement and Multilateral Pressure:*** The international community has a considerable role to play in the current situation of strategic stability in South Asia. The US-India civil nuclear deal and the 2008 nuclear suppliers group (NSG) waiver[90] has effectively rewarded India's non-participation in the NPT and contributed to India's nuclear modernization. A more balanced approach to South Asia would also involve making international nuclear cooperation with India contingent on tangible efforts towards arms control with Pakistan and on transparency measures for India's nuclear program.

iv. ***Revitalizing the Conference on Disarmament:*** The revitalization of the CD as a working negotiating forum is crucial at the multilateral level. The paralysis of the CD, primarily brought on by the disagreements about the scope and sequencing of the FMCT negotiations, has deprived the international community of its main multilateral arms control negotiating forum. The demand by Pakistan for a non-discriminatory FMCT to address existing

[89] US Department of State, "History of the National and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center," https://2021-2025.state.gov/history-of-the-national-and-nuclear-risk-reduction-center/

[90] Siddharth Ramana, *The Nuclear Suppliers Group Waiver* (London: British American Security Information Council (BASIC), 2008), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/92364/gtz08.pdf

stockpiles and not just to end future production of fissile material[91] is a principled and strategically sound stance which deserves to be supported by the international community more widely. The resumption of substantive talks in the CD would also give a multilateral dimension to the bilateral talks between India and Pakistan, which would offer more incentives to engage.

Conclusion

South Asia has lost the normative spirit for arms control that, at least partially, encouraged some degree of strategic restraint in the past. In this context, India has been following a rapid nuclear and conventional military modernization drive, which has substantially altered the regional strategic landscape and deepened the asymmetry with Pakistan, as well as added new doctrinal threats, namely the Cold Start Doctrine and its subsequent mutations that threaten the cornerstones of deterrence stability in South Asia. However, Pakistan has shown a principled and consistent approach towards CMD and FSD as measures of strategic stability without indulging in destabilizing arms race dynamics. This responsible stance, which has been maintained for over two decades and reaffirmed even in the face of great pressure during the May 2025 conflict, is an expression of Pakistan's genuine aspirations for peace in the region and its understanding that the region's strategic stability is in the interest of all regional states. But South Asian strategic stability can no longer rely on unilateral restraints by Pakistan, given the ongoing and unabated Indian military modernization. The lack of arms control mechanisms to oversee India's growing nuclear stockpile and conventional superiority means that there are conditions that can lead to miscalculation, inadvertent escalation and crisis instability. The dangers of the South Asian nuclear dyad could only increase if institutional processes of dialogue, transparency, and mutual restraint are not established. This is a matter of a great degree of urgency. South Asia is the world's most volatile nuclear flashpoint - a region where two nuclear-armed neighbors with unresolved territorial disputes and a history of armed conflict interact across a complex landscape of conventional and nuclear threats. In today's arms control situation, this is a more perilous scenario. The international community, and India, in particular, has a responsibility to change this course or else a miscalculation or an accident can have

[91] US Department of State, "History of the National and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center," https://2021-2025.state.gov/history-of-the-national-and-nuclear-risk-reduction-center/

consequences that are irreversible. Pakistan is prepared to have a serious, sustainable, and just dialogue with regard to regional arms control and strategic stability. The answer lies in whether India will respond.

Iran's Nuclear Program: Collapse of JCPOA and Nuclear Non-Proliferation Efforts

Ghazala Yasmin Jalil*

Abstract

The crisis surrounding Iran's nuclear program has increasingly shifted from diplomatic management towards military confrontation, raising critical questions about the durability of negotiated nuclear restraint arrangements. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented one of the most comprehensive diplomatic efforts to address concerns regarding Iran's nuclear activities through limits on its enrichment activities and reciprocal sanctions relief. However, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States (US) from the agreement in 2018, followed by the reimposition of extensive economic sanctions, fundamentally complicated the Iranian nuclear dispute. This decision undermined the credibility of multilateral diplomacy, eroded confidence in negotiated commitments, and generated a deep trust deficit between Iran and Western powers. Against this backdrop, tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear program have increasingly been managed through coercive pressure and the use of force, as evidenced by the twelve-day US-Israel war on Iran in June 2025, as well as the recent war of 2026. The collapse of the JCPOA framework has, therefore, transformed a previously negotiated nuclear issue into a broader strategic crisis with significant implications for regional security and global nuclear non-proliferation efforts. This article argues that the erosion of diplomatic mechanisms designed to manage Iran's nuclear program risks reinforcing perceptions within Iran that nuclear restraint does not guarantee security or protection from external pressure. Under conditions of sustained confrontation and strategic uncertainty, debates within Iran

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regarding the costs and benefits of continued adherence to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) may intensify. The article examines whether the breakdown of the JCPOA and the military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities could ultimately incentivize Tehran to reconsider its nuclear posture and develop deterrence capabilities as a means of ensuring regime survival. This could lead to a domino effect of nuclear proliferation in the region and across the globe, further undermining the NPT. The study highlights how the failure of diplomacy in favor of the use of military force can reshape proliferation incentives and complicate efforts to manage nuclear risks in an increasingly fragmented global nuclear order.

Keywords: Iran, United States, Israel, Nuclear Non-proliferation, JCPOA, NPT.

Introduction

The nuclear crisis with Iran has moved from diplomacy to war, and now there are serious concerns about the sustainability of negotiated nuclear restraints. The US-Israel attacks on Iran in June 2025[1] and February 2026[2] have once again put the international rules-based system to the test. The world is entering a new phase of strategic uncertainty,[3] with a dramatic restructuring of the nuclear order away from traditional multilateral treaty-based frameworks and towards a highly fractious, volatile world. The backbone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime has been the NPT's foundational grand bargain, in which non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS) agreed to forgo developing nuclear weapons, using peaceful civilian nuclear

[1] Reuters, "The Road to the Israel-Iran War," July 23, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-road-to-the-israel-iran-war/

[2] Reuters, "Israel Says It Launched Pre-emptive Attack against Iran," February 28, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-it-launched-pre-emptive-attack-against-iran-2026-02-28/

[3] Miller, Steven E. "A Nuclear World Transformed: The Rise of Multilateral Disorder." Daedalus 149, no. 2 (2020): 17–36; Götz Neuneck, "The Deep Crisis of Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament: The State of Play and the Challenges," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2, no. 2 (2019): 431–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2019.1701796; and Ghazala Yamin Jalil, "The New Nuclear Arms Race: Implications for Global Security," in *Dynamics of the Changing Global Security Order*, ed. Senthan Selvarajah, Nesrin Kenar, and Lorenzo Fiorito (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023)

technology, and to ensure that the nuclear-weapon states (NWS) would work towards comprehensive disarmament in good faith.[4]

The erosion of that norm, however, signals a growing loss of credibility at international governance, and a growing reliance on geopolitical minilateralism, coercive diplomacy, and a more explicit use of kinetic counter-proliferation options. This crisis of authority is most pronounced in the current lifecycle and eventual failure of the JCPOA, which has turned an extremely technical non-proliferation issue into a regional and global strategic crisis.

The JCPOA was negotiated in 2015 by Iran and the P5+1 powers[5] and was touted to be a success of multilateral diplomacy and a model for the NPT-based regime. It gave Iran sanctions relief in return for restricting its enrichment capabilities for 10-15 years. Importantly, the accord was supported by Iran's adherence to the intrusive Additional Protocol of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which had been voluntarily agreed by Iran, and this represented unprecedented institutional transparency and verification safeguards.[6]

The breakdown of this system was not due to any lack of technical compliance by Tehran but rather it was a fundamental structural weakness within the international system. This underscores the potential fragility of negotiated legal and diplomatic agreements in the face of unexpected policy changes in key powers' domestic politics. The unilateral withdrawal of the Trump administration from the JCPOA in May 2018 and the implementation of the impartial 'maximum pressure' policy, which involved sweeping economic sanctions including secondary sanctions on third-party entities, oil export restrictions, and the freezing of Iranian assets, dealt a blow to the agreement's reciprocity mechanism.[7] The international

[4] Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, opened for signature July 1, 1968, 729 U.N.T.S. 161, entered into force March 5, 1970, art. VI, https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2015/pdf/text%20of%20the%20treaty.pdf

[5] Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Vienna, July 14, 2015, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf

[6] Kesley Davenport, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," Fact Sheet, February 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/joint-comprehensive-plan-action-jcpoa-glance

[7] Stephen P. Mulligan, "Withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal: Legal Authorities and Implications," Congressional Research Service Legal Sidebar LSB10134, May 17, 2018, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB10134

community failed to give Iran the sanctions relief and economic integration that it has sought in return for its nuclear restraint, thereby creating an alarming lack of trust and showing states that continuing compliance does not ensure protection from outside economic warfare or regime change logics.

With the breakdown of subsequent diplomatic efforts to rejuvenate the accord under the Biden and Trump administrations and the June 2025 military strikes, the crisis has entered a dangerous new phase of militarization. In early 2026, after a series of massive US and Israeli strikes on civilian, military and nuclear facilities, the old rules of nuclear diplomacy were over. Now, it is no longer a matter of institutional negotiations on measures of verification; it is about kinetic brinkmanship and conflict.

Once it was stripped of the legal and procedural limitations imposed by the JCPOA, Tehran systematically curtailed its cooperation with the IAEA, thus establishing a very deep 'continuity of knowledge' verification vacuum. This deep transition from a legally constrained to an active security dilemma has ramifications for the stability of the region and international non-proliferation standards. The failure of diplomatic mechanisms within Iran has altered the internal balance of power, marginalizing voices of internationally oriented moderate factions and empowering hardline elements. Consequently, senior Iranian state advisors have openly questioned the status of the Supreme Leader's 2010 nuclear fatwa and publicly warned that any existential threat to the state's survival will leave Tehran with no choice but to adjust its military doctrine toward explicit nuclear weaponization.[8]

Ultimately, if Iran concludes that its regime survival necessitates crossing the weaponization threshold, the resulting structural shock will likely trigger an immediate proliferation cascade across the Middle East.[9] Faced with an ambiguous or overt Iranian deterrent, neighboring middle powers like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkiye, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Jordan may find it hard to rely on external, conditional security

[8] Kamal Kharrazi, interview by Al Jazeera Arabic, *Al Jazeera Arabic*, May 8, 2024. Iran warns it will change nuclear doctrine if 'existence threatened' | Nuclear Weapons News | Al Jazeera

[9] George Perkovich, "How the Iran War undermines the nuclear nonproliferation regime," Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, April 2, 2026 https://thebulletin.org/2026/04/how-the-iran-war-undermines-the-nuclear-nonproliferation-regime/

guarantees.[10] This potential domino effect threatens to normalize regional hedging, trigger an uncontrolled horizontal proliferation, and permanently undermine the normative legitimacy of the NPT framework.

This research paper examines how the collapse of the JCPOA and the subsequent militarization of the Iranian nuclear dispute have fundamentally altered the strategic calculations surrounding state sovereignty, treaty compliance, and regime survival in an increasingly fragmented global nuclear order. The paper addresses the following underlying questions: What does the collapse of JCPOA mean for the nuclear non-proliferation regime? What are the implications of the use of military coercion for Iran's nuclear program and internal debates in Iran? What are the prospects of Iran withdrawing from the NPT? How will it impact non-proliferation in the region or globally? The paper posits that the collapse of the JCPOA, coupled with military strikes on Iranian soil, fundamentally undermines the NPT regime by implying diplomatic compliance does not guarantee security. It would, thereby, incentivize nuclear hedging or breakout as the ultimate deterrent against coercion.

Conceptual Argument

The paper uses Structural Realism to explain why Iran's behavior may be a rational response to an anarchic international system where no higher authority can protect a state from coercion and military aggression. It also argues that in an anarchic world, where the promise of a non-proliferation regime as guarantor to security remains unrealized, states may be forced to rely on the principle of self-help, to think about developing conventional or nuclear deterrents of their own.[11] Consequently, the structural constraints of anarchy trigger a classic security dilemma where actions taken by a state to safeguard its survival are invariably perceived as threats by its adversaries, intensifying systemic friction. In order to safeguard against coercion, encirclement, or preemptive military strikes, states are compelled to maximize their military capabilities, relying ultimately on hard power as the

[10] Colin Kahl, Matthew Irvine and Melissa Dalton, "Atomic Kingdom: If Iran Builds the Bomb, Will Saudi Arabia Be Next?" Center for a New American Security. February 13, 2019, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/atomic-kingdom-if-iran-builds-the-bomb-will-saudi-arabia-be-next

[11] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979) pp. 88-93 and John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) pp. 30–33

sole reliable guarantor of security. Essentially, the principle of self-help would prevail in the contemporary world, where the fracturing of rules-based international system means that hard power remains the ultimate guarantor of sovereignty. In such an anarchic world, nuclear hedging or breakout may be the ultimate deterrent against coercion.[12] Nuclear hedging allows a state to develop the latent technical capacity to construct a nuclear weapon rapidly, serving as a powerful diplomatic lever and a passive deterrent against coercion. Should the threat of military intervention cross a critical threshold, the state may execute a nuclear breakout as the final recourse to ensure survival in a self-help world.

Much has been written on Iran's nuclear program, including the early engagement of international players like the US, Russia, China, the United Kingdom (UK), their respective political and economic agendas, and their own interests[13] and the arduous diplomatic journey culminating in the JCPOA. The current scholarship on the Iranian nuclear program broadly falls into three categories.

The first stream analyzes the JCPOA as a landmark framework for non-proliferation. Scholars in this camp emphasize how the agreement's stringent monitoring provisions strengthened global non-proliferation norms, even though the mechanism was ultimately undermined by political fragility.[14] Many see the JCPOA as the most viable diplomatic template for constraining Iran's nuclear program despite its current collapse. For instance, Khan argues the collapse of JCPOA would erode the global nonproliferation framework by demonstrating the futility of diplomatic engagement over nuclear programs.[15] Others examine the possibility of

[12] Ariel E. Levite, "Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal and Hedging against Nuclearization," *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002–3): 59–88, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951108; Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran, "Iran's Nuclear Programme: A Case Study in Hedging?," *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 1 (2014): 26–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2014.884338

[13] Ghazala Yasmin, "Iran-IAEA Standoff: The WMD Issue," *Strategic Studies* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 83–103

[14] "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 27, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/what-iran-nuclear-deal

[15] Saira Khan, "Conclusion," in *The Iran Nuclear Deal*, Studies in Iranian Politics (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024)

Iran's withdrawal from the NPT and its legal aspects.[16] Legal and policy analysts highlight that Iran's voluntary implementation of the IAEA's Additional Protocol temporarily reduced regional proliferation risks.

The second stream of scholarship focused on the decline of JCPOA, the qualitative and quantitative growth of Iran's nuclear program, and its 'breakout time.' Perkovich raises the critical concern that when treaty compliance fails to guarantee a state's security, sovereign actors may be incentivized to pursue independent nuclear deterrents.[17] Other scholars warn that normalized, prolonged Iranian nuclear hedging erodes the normative authority of global regimes, forcing neighboring states to actively reconsider their independent nuclear postures.[18]

The structural stream contextualizes the Iran nuclear crisis within a broader macro-level analysis, examining it through the lens of structural realism, shifting global hegemony, and economic coercion. Kenneth Waltz provocatively argued from a structural realist perspective that an Iranian nuclear deterrent would create a stable, regional balance of power.[19] Scholars such as Valadbaygi argue that the JCPOA negotiations and subsequent collapse are tied directly to global capital restructuring and intense domestic factional dynamics. The initial diplomatic breakthrough in 2015 is framed as a product of the post-2008 US strategic pivot to Asia,[20] while the 2018 US withdrawal reflects the reassertion of neoconservative and Israel-aligned factions within the Trump administration over deal-

[16] Christopher P. Evans, "Going, Going, Gone? Assessing Iran's Possible Grounds for Withdrawal from the NPT," *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 309–345, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/krab001

[17] George Perkovich, "How the Iran War Undermines the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 2, 2026, https://thebulletin.org/2026/04/how-the-iran-war-undermines-the-nuclear-nonproliferation-regime/

[18] Joseph Rogers, "Iran and the Changing Character of the Nonproliferation Regime," *CSIS*, June 20, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-changing-character-nonproliferation-regime ; and Thanos Dokos, "Iran's Nuclear Propensity: The Probability of Nuclear Use," Non-Proliferation Papers, No. 38, March 2014, p. 3, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/EUNPC_no-38.pdf

[19] Kenneth Waltz, "Why Iran should get the bomb," Foreign *Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2012, pp. 2–4 (font?)

[20] Hillary Rodham Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/

supporting capital/material economic interests.[21] This scholarship views the crisis as a symptom of a broader erosion of multilateralism and major power rivalry.

This article looks at how the micro-level collapse of the JCPOA serves as the empirical tipping point for a macro-level international level systemic shift. This study utilizes structural realism theory to argue that the demise of the non-proliferation regime would trigger a systemic domino effect, signaling a brutal return to a classic, anarchic 'self-help' world.

Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran signed the NPT in 1968 as a non-nuclear-weapon state and pledged not to develop nuclear weapons. However, the matter of Iran's nuclear enrichment activities came to the fore in 2002. It was revealed that Iran had secretly been pursuing uranium enrichment technology without IAEA knowledge.[22] Iran always maintained that the pursuit of an entire nuclear fuel cycle was solely for peaceful purposes.[23] Tehran defended its enrichment program by emphasizing its 'inalienable right' to peaceful technology under Article IV of the NPT, backed by a religious fatwa declaring nuclear weapons unlawful.[24] While the US has accused Iran of pursuing a nuclear weapons program under the pretext of nuclear energy.[25] The issue of contention is the dual nature of nuclear technology. Uranium can be enriched to produce fuel for nuclear power reactors, but can also be enriched further (90% or above) to produce weapons-grade uranium. Due to this proliferation risk, the IAEA monitors any enrichment facilities by NPT member states. Iran claimed that it had no aspirations to develop nuclear weapons, but at the same time, it is not ready to give up its right to

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[21] Kayhan Valadbaygi, "Unpacking the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA): Internationalisation of Capital, Imperial Rivalry and Cooperation, and Regional Power Agency," *Politics* 45, no. 2 (May 2025): 202–222, first published online May 10, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957231173135

[22] Nima Gerami and Pierre Goldschmidt, *The International Atomic Energy Agency's Decision to Find Iran in Non-Compliance, 2002–2006*, Case Study Series, no. 6 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2012), 1–3

[23] Sharon Squassoni, "Iran's Nuclear Program: Recent Developments," Congressional Research Service, updated August 3, 2006, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20060803_RS21592_23194b5d4d31ecbd575cc9f8d867a91be41b60cb.pdf

[24] F. S. Sirjani, "Iran's Nuclear Fatwa," *International Relations and Diplomacy* 4, no. 2 (2016)

[25]Sharon A. Squassoni, *Iran's Nuclear Program: Recent Developments*, CRS Report for Congress RS21592 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 3, 2006)

pursue peaceful nuclear technology.[26] Many wanted Iran to give up its nuclear enrichment capabilities – including the IAEA, the European Union (EU), and the US. Long negotiations eventually culminated into an agreement called the JCPOA in 2015, endorsed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) through its Resolution 2231.[27] The post-US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran shifted its narrative, invoking Paragraph 36 of the JCPOA[28] to justify its incremental enrichment escalation (currently up to 60%) as a legitimate reciprocal response to US sanctions.

The Rise and Fall of the JCPOA

The JCPOA, also referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, was negotiated in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 or the US, UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany. It was designed to limit element of Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting international sanctions. It was considered a major non-proliferation achievement.

Some of the JCPOA key elements helped restrict Iran's nuclear enrichment activities as well as afforded IAEA inspections under the Additional Protocol (AP). It included capping uranium enrichment at 3.67% and limited the stockpile of enriched uranium to 300 kg for 15 years.[29] It reduced the operational centrifuge limits to totals 6,104 IR-1s machines for 10 years. In addition, enrichment was restricted to the Natanz facility only, and Plutonium reprocessing was stopped.[30]

The JCPOA also provided unprecedented IAEA transparency as Iran agreed to implement the IAEA's AP without ratifying it, thus allowing inspectors quick access to both declared and undeclared sites as well as long-term surveillance. The JCPOA stipulated a 20-year surveillance of centrifuge

[26] *Agreed Statement at the End of a Visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran by the Foreign Ministers of Britain, France and Germany (Tehran Declaration),* Tehran, October 21, 2003, Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy

[27] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2231 (2015) [on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Programme]*, S/RES/2231 (July 20, 2015), https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/unsc_resolution2231-2015.pdf

[28] *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, Vienna, July 14, 2015, https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/245317.pdf

[29] 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,' July 14, 2015, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-comprehensive-plan-action_en

[30] Ibid

production facilities and a 25-year surveillance of uranium mines. In return, Iran was given sanctions relief. Sanctions targeting Iran's oil, banking, and shipping sectors by the UN, EU, and US were lifted on the Implementation Day.[31]

Ultimately, the JCPOA not only provided unprecedented transparency and quick access to the IAEA on Iran's nuclear program and facilities, allowing confidence that it was not producing nuclear weapons, but also limited uranium enrichment and forbade the extraction of plutonium through reprocessing at Arak nuclear reactor that had the potential to produce one or two nuclear weapons a year from the plutonium from its spent fuel.[32] Thus, JCPOA was a non-proliferation win.

The success of JCPOA in curtailing Iran's nuclear program was dealt a major blow when the US under President Donald Trump, who unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in May 2018. Trump administration argued that the sunset clauses in the JCPOA was a temporary fix rather than a permanent solution, and key restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment and centrifuge levels were set to expire in 10–15 years. Subsequently, Iran would be free to pursue its nuclear program.[33] The US also reimposed economic sanctions on Iran. On the other hand, Iran has accused the US of reneging on its commitments and blamed Europe for submitting to US unilateralism.

Remaining parties to the Iran nuclear deal - China, France, Germany, Russia, and the UK tried their best to save the JCPOA; however, it was not possible due to US unilateral sanctions that discouraged European firms from doing business with Iran. In response, Iran accelerated its uranium enrichment activities and progressively started abandoning its commitments under JCPOA, from 2019 onwards. In February 2021, in response to the assassination of the Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh by Israeli

[31] Ibid

[32] Gary Samore, ed., *The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, August 3, 2015), https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iran-nuclear-deal-definitive-guide

[33] "Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," May 18, 2015, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/

operatives, Iran suspended the implementation of Additional Protocol.[34] Iran's cooperation with the IAEA also started declining in response to US coercive diplomacy.

By May 2025, the IAEA claimed that Iran possessed over 400kg of uranium enriched to 60% purity - a near 50% increase in enriched material in three months.[35] Although it was well short of the weapons-grade uranium of 90% enrichment or above, the IAEA Director General, Rafael Grossi, expressed serious concern over the enrichment levels.[36] The US and Western sources estimated that Iran, if it chose, could produce weapons-grade material in less than two weeks and manufacture a nuclear bomb within months.[37] Iran, on the other hand, consistently claimed that its nuclear program was for peaceful purposes and that it had no plans to build nuclear weapons. Iran's religious and political leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, declared weapons of mass destruction un-Islamic during the Iran-Iraq War. This anti-nuclear stance or 'Fatwa' has been strictly maintained by his successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. On one occasion, Khamenei said, 'I stress that the Islamic Republic has never pursued nuclear weapons. At the same time, it will never give up the right of its people to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Our slogan is, 'Nuclear energy for all, and nuclear weapons for none.'[38] Iran has also been a strong proponent of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East in parallel.

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[34] Motamed, M. "Iran buries slain nuclear scientist, promises retaliation," Al *Jazeera*, November 30, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/30/iran-buries-assassinated-scientist-amid-promises-of-retaliation

[35] "Iran significantly growing uranium stockpile, warns UN nuclear agency," *BBC News*, May 31, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1mg7kx2d45o

[36] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015): Report by the Director General*, GOV/2025/24 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, May 31, 2025), https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/06/gov2025-24.pdf

[37] Paul K. Kerr, *Iran and Nuclear Weapons Production*, CRS In Focus IF12106 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 24, 2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12106/IF12106.20.pdf

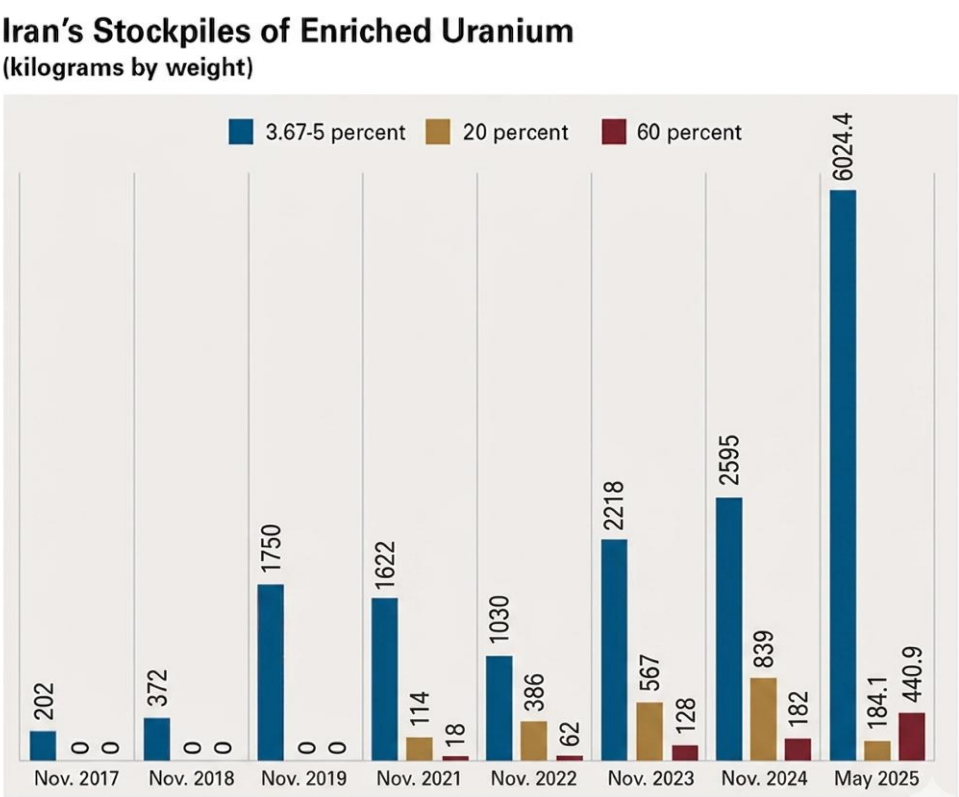
[38] Ali Khamenei, "Religious and Political Aspects of the Ban on Building Nuclear Weapons," March 2, 2021, quoting the Leader's address delivered at the 16th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, Tehran, August 30, 2012, https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8398/Religious-and-political-aspects-of-the-ban-on-building-nuclear

Thus, the US withdrawal was a major blow to the JCPOA. As a result, Iran's nuclear program advanced much more than it did under the JCPOA restrictions. The IR-6 centrifuges that Iran was using are roughly 10 times more efficient than the first-generation IR-1 models permitted under the original deal. While the deal limited Iran's enrichment to 3.67% and stockpile of enriched uranium to 300 kg for 10-15 years, as of June 2025, its total enriched uranium stockpile was 9040.5 kg, of which 6024 kg was enriched up to 5%; 184.1 kg enriched up to 20%; and 440.9 kg of uranium enriched up to 60%.[39] Iran also increased the number of centrifuges from 6,104 IR-1s to over 12,000, which included advanced IR-4 and IR-6 centrifuges as well.[40] Iran also resumed heavy water production at Arak and started enriching uranium at Fordow, abandoning the JCPOA limits in response to US sanctions. In addition, Iran also started limiting the access of IAEA inspectors to its nuclear facilities while withholding the recordings from February 2022 onwards till the US and Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities.[41]

[39] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015): Report by the Director General*, GOV/2025/50 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, September 3, 2025), https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2025-50.pdf

[40] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015): Report by the Director General*, GOV/2025/50 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, September 3, 2025)

[41] "US, Israel Attack Iran Updates: Khamenei, Top Security Officials Killed," *Al Jazeera*, February 28, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2026/2/28/live-israel-launches-attacks-on-iran-multiple-explosions-heard-in-tehran



Source: International Atomic Energy Agency[42]

Thus, the demise of the JCPOA was a non-proliferation loss. It removed several restrictions on Iran's enrichment activities and afforded limited IAEA monitoring. It not only widened the trust deficit between Iran and the US but also served as a blow to the global non-proliferation regime. The JCPOA was replaced initially with coercive diplomacy and subsequently led to military strikes by the US and Israel, thus eliciting more defiant and hardliner responses in Iran.

Military Strikes on Iran: Shrinking Space for Diplomacy

The US withdrawal from JCPOA was accompanied by a decline in diplomacy to restore limits on Iran's nuclear program. There were some

[42] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015),* GOV/2025/24 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, May 31, 2025), page number, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/25/06/gov2025-24.pdf

efforts by the President Joe Biden Administration to revive the JCPOA with the mediation of European countries, however, the Vienna talks ended unsuccessfully without any agreement.[43] Since early 2025, under President Donald Trump's second term, there have been several rounds of diplomatic talks to reach a nuclear deal with Iran; however, due to the rigid position of both states, no agreement could be reached. The hurdles have been over the issues of verification and transparency measures, sanctions lift, the fate of Iran's stockpile of highly enriched uranium, and its future enrichment capabilities.[44] The US had also reportedly proposed a framework of a regional consortium model where uranium enrichment would take place in Iran's neighboring countries, a proposal that was unacceptable to Iran. However, diplomacy was abruptly abandoned in favor of military coercion following the release of an IAEA report on May 31, 2025. The report alleged that Iran's stockpile of 60% highly enriched uranium had surged by nearly 50% to 408.6 kg and definitively linked past undeclared nuclear activities across multiple sites.[45] The IAEA report was heavily leveraged as a political pretext by the US and Israel to disrupt the diplomatic track, occurring just two days before a scheduled sixth round of negotiations mediated by Oman. Thus, diplomacy was abandoned in favor of military coercion first when the Israeli military launched a series of air strikes targeting Iran's nuclear facilities and military sites across Iran on June 13, 2025, that killed senior Iranian military officials and nuclear scientists in a large-scale attack.[46] The IAEA confirmed that the Natanz enrichment site was impacted, but no radiation leaks were detected, while the Esfahan and Fordow sites were not impacted. However, Director General Grossi expressed deep concern, stating: 'Nuclear facilities must never be attacked... Such attacks have serious implications for nuclear safety, security, and safeguards, as well as

[43] Maziar Motamedi, "Iran nuclear talks to restart in Vienna with EU mediation," *Al Jazeera*, August 2, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/3/iran-nuclear-talks-to-restart-in-vienna-with-eu-mediation

[44] Matthew Sharp and Nate Swanson, "Can Trump Get a New Nuclear Deal with Iran? Washington Has More Demands—and Tehran Has More Leverage," *Foreign Affairs*, May 12, 2026, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/can-trump-get-new-nuclear-deal-iran

[45] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015): Report by the Director General*, GOV/2025/24 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, May 31, 2025). gov2025-24.pdf

[46] "Israel Carries Out Strikes Targeting Iran's Nuclear, Military Sites," *Al Jazeera*, June 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/13/sounds-of-explosions-heard-in-irans-capital-tehran

regional and international peace and security.'[47] Again, on June 22, 2025, the US attacked three nuclear facilities in Iran as part of the Twelve-Day War, code-named Operation Midnight Hammer.'[48]

The diplomatic impasse deepened significantly when a joint US-Israeli campaign of massive airstrikes, codenamed Operation Epic Fury and Operation Roaring Lion, was unleashed on February 28, 2026. This military escalation directly followed the Oman-mediated backchannel talks held earlier that month, where Washington and Tehran had attempted to negotiate a new framework. These negotiations collapsed primarily because of unyielding, fundamentally irreconcilable core demands: the Trump administration insisted on a strict 'zero enrichment' policy and the complete dismantlement of Iran's ballistic missile infrastructure, while Tehran refused any deal that did not grant immediate, comprehensive sanctions relief and recognize its sovereign right to domestic enrichment. President Trump has struggled to define the rationale of the conflict, oscillating between regime change, the imminent danger from Iran's nuclear program, and the need to roll it back. The latter rationale is dubious since just months ago, after the June 2025 strikes, he claimed that Iran's nuclear program was 'obliterated.'[49]

The renewed attacks came on the heels of several rounds of talks between Iran and the US that failed to reach a diplomatic solution to the issue of Iran's nuclear program. The last round was held on February 25 and mediated by Oman just two days before the attacks. Under the Operation Epic Fury, which consisted of nearly 900 strikes within just the first 12 hours. Strikes on military infrastructure, air defenses, and Iranian leadership were conducted, resulting in the deaths of several high-ranking officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran launched counter-strikes against US bases in the region, Israel, and also closed the Straits of Hormuz,

[47] International Atomic Energy Agency, "Statement on the Situation in Iran," June 13, 2025, https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/statement-on-the-situation-in-iran-13-june-2025

[48] Andrew Roth, "Donald Trump Says US Has Attacked Three Iranian Nuclear Sites and 'Totally Obliterated' Them," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/22/donald-trump-says-us-has-attacked-three-iranian-nuclear-sites-and-totally-obliterated-them

[49] "US Strikes on Iran's Nuclear Sites Only Set Program Back by Months, Pentagon Report Says," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/24/iran-strikes-nuclear-sites-report

from where 20% of the world's oil passes.[50] The conflict has caused havoc within and outside the region, seriously hampering global trade and economy, with skyrocketing global oil prices. Nevertheless, a fragile conditional ceasefire was declared on April 8, 2026, with Pakistan acting as the mediator.[51]

The unilateral US-Israeli strikes on Iran cannot be justified under international law,[52] nor was there any tangible evidence that Iran was on the path to nuclear weapons development, nor did it pose any imminent threat to the US or Israel. Over the years, Iran cooperated with the IAEA even after the withdrawal of the US from JCPOA. However, despite repeated assurances from the IAEA that there was no clear evidence of weapons development,[53] the path to diplomacy and non-proliferation was abandoned by the US and Israel in favor of military options. There was also no credible evidence regarding the US claims that Iran could have developed nuclear weapons in as little as two weeks. The IAEA did not provide any evidence to that effect. In April 2026, Director General Rafel Grossi stated, 'While there has been no evidence of Iran building a nuclear bomb, its large stockpile of near weapons-grade enriched uranium and refusal to grant my inspectors full access are cause for serious concern.'[54] The comparison to case of Iraq comes to mind where it was declared that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction, but none were found even after the US-led military invasion of the country.

This unfortunate state of affairs and unilateral use of force in violation of the US Charter not only presents the fracturing nature of international law, but also an unraveling of the non-proliferation regime as well. The attacks against Iran have not only improved the public perception of the hardliners

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[50] "US-Israel-Iran Conflict 2026," Policy Brief – March 2026, https://ciss.org.pk/policy-brief-march-2026-us-israel-iran-conflict-2026/

[51] "Pakistan offers 'two-phased' truce deal to end US-Israel war on Iran," Al Jazeera, April 6, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/6/pakistan-offers-two-tier-truce-iran-wont-open-hormuz-under-temporary-one

[52] Ihsan Faruk Kilavuz, "The War on Iran and the Unravelling of Legal Order," *TRT World Research Centre*, April 9, 2026, https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/publications/analysis/the-war-on-iran-and-the-unravelling-of-legal-order/

[53] Kelsey Davenport, "IAEA Investigations of Iran's Nuclear Activities," *Fact Sheets & Brief, May 2026, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/iaea-investigations-irans-nuclear-activities*

[54] "IAEA Provides Updates on Iran's Nuclear Facilities," *Nuclear Newswire*, April 6, 2026, https://www.ans.org/news/article-7911/iaea-provides-updates-on-iran-nuclear-facilities/

inside Iran but also weakened trust in international law and the non-proliferation regime.

Shift in Iranian Strategic Calculus

Abandoning the path to diplomacy and trust in non-proliferation in favor of military options is likely to further strengthen hardliners within Iran. Discussions within Iran regarding the nuclear path have shifted significantly from a policy of 'strategic patience' and nuclear energy capability towards an increasingly heated debate on nuclear deterrence and NPT withdrawal. This shift initially started after the US withdrawal from JCPOA, but more recently in the wake of military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in 2025 and the US-Israel war of 2026, as well as the perceived failure of international agreements to provide security or economic benefits.[55]

The Realists or the hardliners are increasingly dominant within Iran. They argue that diplomacy is a dead-end and only exposes Iranian vulnerabilities.[56] They assert that the US and Israel would never accept a revolutionary Iran, no matter how Iran constrained its nuclear program. Their prescribed solution is a policy of maximum deterrence comprised of a robust missile program and expanding, moving closer to the nuclear threshold to make the cost of regime change high.[57] On the other hand, there are reformists or liberalists who are increasingly marginalized. They endorsed economics first approach through global integration.[58]

There is a legislative push to withdraw from the NPT post the 2026 military strikes on Iran. Hardliner members of the Iranian Parliament introduced legislation to exit the NPT. On March 28, Malek Shariati, an Iranian parliamentarian, introduced legislation called 'Support for the Nuclear Rights of the Iranian Nation,' built on three pillars, including withdrawal from NPT, repeal of the law on JCPOA implementation, and formation of

[55] Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran and nuclear opacity: Strategic ambiguity, retaliation, and leverage," Middle East Council on Global Affairs, September 24, 2025, https://mecouncil.org/publication/iran-and-nuclear-opacity-strategic-ambiguity-retaliation-and-leverage/

[56] Ibid

[57] Habib Badawi, "Iran's Dual Strategy in the Middle East: Proxy Warfare, Nuclear Ambitions, and Strategic Recalibration," *Güvenlik Stratejileri Dergisi* 22, no. 53 (April 2026): 62–73, https://doi.org/10.17752/guvenlikstrtj.1729750

[58] Krzysztof Strachota, "The Islamic Republic at an impasse: Internal instability following the Twelve-Day War" OSW Commentary, Vol. 700, December 18, 2025, 1–8, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW_Commentary_700_0.pdf

new international agreements to advance peaceful nuclear technologies.[59] Ebrahim Rezaei, spokesman for the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of Iran's parliament, shared the regime's opinion on his social media account on March 27 that NPT would become meaningless as it 'has had no benefit for us.'[60] While Fada Hossein Maleki, a member of the national security commission, was reported as saying that Iran should honor its international commitments.[61] This was implicitly a reference to the NPT and perhaps the JCPOA as well. Esmail Baghaei, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, confirmed on March 28 that the NPT withdrawal legislation had been introduced. At the same time, he also reaffirmed that 'the Islamic Republic of Iran has never sought, and does not seek, nuclear weapons…this is a matter of genuine discussion within public opinion and at the parliamentary level.'[62]

Thus, should Iran choose to exit from the NPT, Article X permits a state-party to withdraw 'if it decides that extraordinary events, related to the subject matter of this Treaty, have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country.'[63] The state party is required to give a three-month notice and a statement on the extraordinary events that led to the decision. Iran can potentially state that the continued attacks on its nuclear facilities pose an existential threat to its exit from the NPT.

The official opinion in Iran had started to transform due to the persistent threat of strikes over its nuclear installations from Israel, even before the military strikes of 2025 and 2026 that paved the way for the legislation to withdraw from the NPT. The public discourse was already diluting the symbolic barrier of Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa against nuclear weapons. In May 2024, Kamal Kharrazi, adviser to Khamenei, said, 'We have no decision to build a nuclear bomb, but should Iran's existence be threatened,

[59] Libby Flatoff, "Iran Threatens to Withdraw from the NPT," *Arms Control Today*, May 2026, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2026-05/news/iran-threatens-withdraw-npt

[60] Libby Flatoff, "Iran Threatens to Withdraw from the NPT," *Arms Control Today*, May 2026, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2026-05/news/iran-threatens-withdraw-npt

[61] "Despite 'significant progress' in US-Iran negotiations, Trump's unpredictability remains a concern: Iranian lawmaker," *Dawn News*, May 28, 2026, https://www.dawn.com/news/2003583

[62] Libby Flatoff, "Iran Threatens to Withdraw from the NPT," *Arms Control Today*, May 2026, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2026-05/news/iran-threatens-withdraw-npt

[63] 'Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT),' https://www.iaea.org/publications/documents/treaties/npt

there will be no choice but to change our military doctrine.'[64] He further said that, 'In the case of an attack on our nuclear facilities by the Zionist regime, our deterrence will change.'[65] Thus, the debate was clearly moving towards changing the posture if Iran ever faced an existential threat. Subsequently, after the Twelve Day War in June 2025, reports emerged of intense pressure from the IRGC commanders on Khamenei to formally rescind the fatwa against nuclear weapons.[66] Khamenei's martyrdom in the US-Israel strikes may have cleared a path for Iran's hardline factions to rethink the fatwa ruling and solidify resolve to pursue a nuclear deterrent.

Thus, Iran would be well in it right to acquire nuclear weapons capability for self-defense in the future. Especially given that nothing but hard power and deterrence seem to work in countering military aggression from major powers. President Trump's threats to bomb Iranian civilization back to the 'Stone Age.'[67] further endorse the notion that only military might remain the guarantor of a country's survival.

The Erosion of Global Non-Proliferation: Regional and Global Fallout

The abandoning of the non-proliferation diplomatic path in favor of force weakens trust in the rules-based international order. The prospects of Iran withdrawing from the NPT remain high and would have negative implications for the already weakened non-proliferation regime. This Iranian decision could potentially initiate a cascade of withdrawals from the NPT, triggering a domino effect where other countries in the region and across the globe may decide to pursue nuclear weapons capabilities.[68] Iran's NPT withdrawal and potential pursuit of a nuclear deterrent would also incentivize the rival states in the region to accelerate their own nuclear

[64] 'Iran warns it will change nuclear doctrine if 'existence threatened',' *Al Jazeera*, May 9 ,2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/9/iran-warns-it-will-change-nuclear-doctrine-if-existence-threatened

[65] 'Iran warns it will change nuclear doctrine if 'existence threatened'

[66] Mostafa Salem and Leila Gharagozlou, "Cornered and wounded, will Iran now go for a nuclear bomb?" *CNN*, March 29, 2026, https://edition.cnn.com/2026/03/29/middleeast/iran-nuclear-bomb-analysis-intl

[67] Reuters, "Trump Says 'A Whole Civilization Will Die Tonight' if Iran Does Not Make Deal," April 7, 2026; Amnesty International, "Iran: President Trump's Apocalyptic Threats of Large-Scale Civilian Devastation Demand Urgent Global Action to Prevent Atrocity Crimes," April 7, 2026. Trump says 'a whole civilization will die tonight' if Iran does not make a deal | Reuters

[68] Moonis Ahmar, "If Iran Goes Nuclear," *The Friday Times*, May 14, 2026, https://www.thefridaytimes.com/14-May-2026/iran-goes-nuclear

weapons program. It could, thus, cause a cascade of proliferation in the Middle East, making it a more dangerous place.[69] States could, in effect, conclude that with the unraveling of the global rules-based order, their best option may be to pursue a nuclear weapons capability of their own. It may trigger a classic security dilemma across the Middle East. Operating within an anarchic international system where state survival dictates a self-help imperative, Iran's strategic shift would alter the regional balance of power. According to Scott Sagan's 'Security Model' of nuclear proliferation, states build nuclear weapons to counter significant foreign threats.[70] Consequently, a nuclear-armed Iran would structurally compel regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia to accelerate their own military nuclear programs to balance the threat. This dynamic threatens to unleash a regional horizontal proliferation cascade. Ultimately, regional actors are drawing a stark neorealist conclusion: as liberal institutionalist frameworks and the rules-based non-proliferation order unravel, international treaties offer no centralized enforcement to guarantee security, leaving the unilateral acquisition of an absolute deterrent as the most rational strategic choice for survival.

Iran's withdrawal from the NPT would point to a weakening of nonproliferation norms, rules, and international legal structures that have been the bulwark against horizontal nuclear proliferation. The rules-based order may be replaced by the use of military coercion. As witnessed by the US and Israel's willingness to use force to achieve regime change and their desired outcomes may be the foreseeable trajectory in the region. It is likely to accelerate a shift toward a more confrontational geopolitical environment.[71] This is already becoming apparent with the recent use of force in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and even to other regional countries. Therefore, clearly use of force in violation of the UN Charter on the false pretext of preventing proliferation may ultimately set off a chain reaction by states in pursuit of proliferation across the region. States may

[69] Jamie Kwong and Nicole Grajewski, "Will Iran Withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty?," *War on the Rocks*, November 1, 2024, https://warontherocks.com/will-iran-withdraw-from-the-nuclear-non-proliferation-treaty/

[70] Scot Sagan, "Why do states build nuclear weapons? Three models in search of a bomb," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No.3, 1996, 54–86

[71] Joseph Rodgers, "Iran and the Changing Character of the Nonproliferation Regime," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 20, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-changing-character-nonproliferation-regime

feel that hard military power and nuclear deterrence may be the only guarantor of their security.[72]

Cases of Libya and North Korea may be instructive in this regard. Libya is a prime example of a country that decided to dismantle its Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program under the leadership of Muammar Gaddafi in 2003, in exchange for sanctions relief. However, that fateful decision led to the weakening of Libya, thus making it possible for NATO to intervene in Libya, leading to Gaddafi's death in 2011. The Libyan episode set an example for the rest of the countries that by giving up strategic capabilities, it may not lead to an increase in security, but would rather encourage states to use military force against that country. Even more illustrious is the case of North Korea, in which Pyongyang withdrew from the NPT in 2003, and subsequently developed nuclear weapons and an advanced missile delivery system with a capability to reach the US mainland. Despite extreme isolation and sanctions, North Korea's nuclear deterrence compelled the US to engage in two summits, without any success. Tehran and others would conclude the North Korean and Libyan case studies that sovereignty can only be guaranteed by a credible and robust nuclear deterrence.[73]

The case of Ukraine is also important in this regard. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world on its territory, with an estimated 1,900 strategic warheads. Under the trilateral Massandra Accords and Budapest Memorandum, these weapons were transferred to Russia to be dismantled by 1996, in exchange for economic aid and security assurances from Russia, the US, and the UK.[74] It joined the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state. However, after the 2022 war with Russia, Ukraine has been repeatedly facing nuclear threats from Russia.[75] Several scholars in Ukraine now regret

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[72] Toby Dalton, 'Friendly' nuclear proliferation and its discontents,' *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No1,2026, pp. 7–25.

[73] Van Diepen, "Eight lessons for North Korea's nuclear and missile forces from the ongoing Iran conflict," 38 North, Henry L. Stimson Center, March 16, 2026, https://www.38north.org/2026/03/eight-lessons-for-north-koreas-nuclear-and-missile-forces-from-the-ongoing-iran-conflict/

[74] "Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, and Security Assurances at a Glance," Factsheet, Arms Control Association, March 2022, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/ukraine-nuclear-weapons-and-security-assurances-glance

[75] Polina Sinovets and Muhammed Ali Alkış, "Deterrence, Compellence, or Credibility Fatigue? Russian Nuclear Threats in the War on Ukraine," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 8, no. 2 (2025): 393–408, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2586386

giving up nuclear weapons, and there were speculations that Ukrainian defense officials had suggested assembling a simple nuclear device within months was possible, although it was later denied by the Ukrainian Ministry of defense.[76] Thus, Ukraine's case also has valuable lessons – only a robust military power, and nuclear deterrent can ensure security of a country.

With the weakening of non-proliferation norms and prominence of blatant use of military power, the salience of nuclear weapons and states' reliance on nuclear deterrent is increasing, and if Iran opts to withdraw from NPT, it may set off a domino effect across the region. Saudi Arabia has made it clear many times that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, it will also do so. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman clearly stated in 2018: 'Without a doubt, if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we would follow suit as soon as possible.'[77] Saudi Arabia is already negotiating for a civilian nuclear program with the US. Unfolding details indicate that the deal may establish uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing facilities within Saudi Arabia rather than importing fuel from abroad.[78] Some analyses highlighted that this Saudi demand is designed to establish a latent nuclear capability – an infrastructure that could be used to pursue a weapons program if the regional security dynamics require so in the future.[79] In contrast, the UAE is also undergoing civil nuclear cooperation with the US, but has foregone domestic enrichment and rather directly imports fuel assemblies from South Korea.[80] While the UAE has shown no aspirations to build a nuclear weapon, it lacks the enrichment and reprocessing facilities that may be needed for technical expertise to develop nuclear weapons.

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[76] "Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons. Now it's asking why," *BBC*, December 5, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crl3ndxglwxo

[77] Mostafa Salem and Leila Gharagozlou, "Cornered and wounded, will Iran now go for a nuclear bomb?"

[78] "Proposed Saudi-US deal could allow uranium enrichment, arms control experts warn," PBS, February 20, 2026, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/proposed-saudi-u-s-deal-could-allow-uranium-enrichment-arms-control-experts-warn

[79] Joseph Rogers, "Iran and the Changing Character of the Nonproliferation Regime," *CSIS*, June 20, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-changing-character-nonproliferation-regime

[80] Darya Dolzikova, "The US-Saudi Nuclear Deal: Supply Chain and Non-Proliferation Implications," *RUSI*, November 26, 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/us-saudi-nuclear-deal-supply-chain-and-non-proliferation-implications

Turkiye's response is diplomatically nuanced, and it still would take years for its first nuclear power plant to become operational. However, Turkiye has hinted at a systemic rejection of nuclear asymmetry in its neighborhood. Turkiye currently relies on the NATO nuclear umbrella. However, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has publicly criticized the non-proliferation architecture and nuclear-armed states for forbidding Turkiye from acquiring its own deterrent. He explicitly said that, 'Some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads... But [they tell us] 'you can't have them.' This, I cannot accept.'[81]

Turkiye has been steadily deepening its civilian nuclear cooperation with Russia through the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, of which the first unit is expected to become operational by late 2026. While these reactors are under the IAEA safeguards, civil nuclear power infrastructure provides Ankara with the technical expertise that may subsequently be utilized for nuclear weapons purposes if new nuclear powers emerge in the region and the regional security environment may deteriorate further.[82]

The cascading effect in the Middle East may unfold in slow motion. Iran's neighbors, like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others, may engage in hedging.[83] With basic civilian nuclear infrastructure and capacity to produce low-enriched uranium would give them a baseline should they choose to pursue nuclear weapons capability. This would create a highly volatile environment where multiple states could possess latent nuclear capabilities. Ultimately, powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and possibly Egypt may view indigenous nuclear capabilities as the only guarantor in a deteriorating regional environment where they could just become collateral damage in a conflict between Iran and the US-Israel.

Other countries around the globe could potentially join the proliferation cascade. There have been debates in Japan over the issue of nuclear

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[81] Ezgi Yazigioglu "A Look Upon Turkey's Future Nuclear Weapons Policy," September 30, 2019, https://www.iris-france.org/en/a-look-upon-turkeys-future-nuclear-weapons-policy-3

[82] Rameen Siddiqui, "The Nuclear Domino: How the Iran War Changed Nuclear Politics Forever," April 26, 2026, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/04/27/the-nuclear-domino-how-the-iran-war-changed-nuclear-politics-forever

[83] Jana Baldus, Harald Müller, and Carmen Wunderlich, "The Global Nuclear Order and the Crisis of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime: Taking Stock and Moving Forward," *Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* 10, no. 2 (2021): 195–218, https://doi.org/10.1007/s42597-021-00066-0

weapons. In 2024, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba called for an Asian version of NATO, which could introduce nuclear weapons in the region.[84] Similar debates are taking place in South Korea in response to the nuclear threat from North Korea. In 2023, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said, 'It's possible that the problem gets worse and our country will introduce tactical nuclear weapons or build them on our own.'[85] Public polling in South Korea consistently shows majority support for an indigenous nuclear program.

This will make the region a very dangerous place. In the Middle Eastern context, Kenneth Waltz's argument 'more will be better' would not work.[86] On the contrary, as Scott Sagan argued, new nuclear states would likely not have adequate organizational controls over their new weapons capabilities, resulting in a greater risk of deliberate or accidental nuclear war.[87] There would also be a greater number of nuclear dyads, making deterrence complex and risk-prone.

The unraveling of non-proliferation in the Middle East and across other regions of the world would further undermine the NPT-based global non-proliferation architecture. NPT has not made any substantive progress on disarmament since its inception, and the promise of nuclear-weapon states on disarmament remains unfulfilled. The Iran conflict has threatened the existence of the NPT and the so-called rules-based order. It demonstrated that a country that engaged in good-faith diplomacy over the years could not ensure its security in exchange for limits on its nuclear program.[88] Thus, recent events have hollowed out the treaty's foundational logic and have precipitated a systemic crisis of faith in international diplomacy. Moreover,

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[84] Kim Kelly, "Incoming Japan PM Ishiba's 'Asian NATO' idea test for US diplomacy,' *Reuters*, September 27, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/incoming-japan-pm-ishibas-asian-nato-idea-test-us-diplomacy-2024-09-27/

[85] "In a First, South Korea Declares Nuclear Weapons a Policy Option," *The New York Times*, January 12, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/12/world/asia/south-korea-nuclear-weapons.html

[86] In Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan*, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (W.W. Norton, 2002) Kenneth Walts argues that due to the sheer destructive potential of nuclear weapons 'more may be better' since it will create deterrence and prevent conflict.

[87] Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (W.W. Norton, 2002)

[88] Rameen Siddiqui, "The Nuclear Domino: How the Iran War Changed Nuclear Politics Forever," *Modern Diplomacy*, April 27, 2026, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/04/27/the-nuclear-domino-how-the-iran-war-changed-nuclear-politics-forever/

a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East region and across the world would render the NPT irrelevant and would harken the return of a Waltzian self-help world.

Conclusion

By early 2025, Iran's nuclear program stood further advanced than it did in 2018 when the US withdrew from the JCPOA. The US and Israeli strikes in 2025 and 2026 may have destroyed some or all of Iran's nuclear facilities. However, there is a deep trust deficit between the US and Iran, after the US and Israel struck Iranian nuclear installations and attacked Iran in the middle of diplomatic processes. In 2025, right after the April diplomatic rounds of talks, Israel and the US bombed Iranian nuclear facilities, and again in February 2026, just a day after the diplomatic talks, both the US and Israel attacked Iran even though the diplomatic breakthrough appeared to be within reach, as stated by the Omani Foreign Minister.[89]

Iranian acquisition of the nuclear deterrent would alter the strategic calculus of the entire Middle East, opening increased prospects of regional proliferation. Facing an acute security dilemma and stripped of faith in international guarantees, neighboring states may feel structurally compelled to mirror Tehran's posture. This cascading domino effect risks completely unraveling the global non-proliferation architecture, replacing a rules-based order with a hyper-militarized, multi-polar regional subsystem where the quest for survival would dictate the acquisition of an independent nuclear deterrent. The impending unraveling of the non-proliferation regime may systematically strip away liberal institutional illusions, leaving independent hard power and nuclear hedging as the sole viable guarantor of national security in an anarchic international order. These events provide a stark validation of Kenneth Waltz's structural realism. The post-JCPOA crisis proves that within an anarchic international system, international law and regulatory treaties are subservient to major power interests. The repeated use of military force may revert the global arena to a self-help environment.

[89] The National, quoting Oman's foreign minister Badr Al Busaidi on February 28, 2026, https://www.facebook.com/TheNationalNews/posts/omans-foreign-minister-badr-al-busaidi-said-he-was-dismayed-by-joint-us-israeli-/1356822973140790/

Fragmented Global Nuclear Order: Modi's Calculated Irrationality, and Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures Between India and Pakistan

Rizwan Zeb*

Abstract

The expiry of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) effectively ended the traditional global nuclear order. This fragmentation of the nuclear order is marked by new challenges in the form of artificial intelligence (AI), cyber capabilities, and autonomous systems in the global and regional nuclear landscape. The South Asian nuclear dyad is a prime example of this complexity as a region with a poor record of nuclear risk reduction and confidence-building measures (CBMs). Since 2014, India has been ruled by a Hindutva-motivated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led regime that seems to demonstrate a tendency to use war and nuclear weapons to achieve political ends, posing a grave threat to Pakistan's national security. This paper aims to understand the history and historicity of the global nuclear order, thereby situating the South Asian nuclear dyad within it. It explores how India and Pakistan developed certain risk reduction measures and CBMs. The paper also addresses how the regime led by Narendra Modi is inclined to risk-taking behavior, which adversely affects strategic stability between India and Pakistan. The challenges posed by the emerging technologies, AI, and enhanced cyber capabilities have complicated the already troubled strategic stability in the region. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for

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a peace-oriented partnership between India and Pakistan on regional strategic stability.

Keywords: Strategic Arms Control, Disarmament, Strategic Stability, Arms Control Regime, Nonproliferation, Nuclear Weapons

Introduction

Charles Dickens opened his *A Tale of Two Cities* with by stating, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.'[1] Unbeknownst to Dickens, more than a hundred and fifty years after he published his classic, these lines aptly explain the state of the global nuclear order and the challenges it faces.

Since the early period of the Cold War, the global nuclear order has been functioning through certain protocols, treaties, and regulations. Even the new entrants and the gatecrashers followed these conventions. However, with the renewed great power competition and the return to tribalism within the institution of the state, the process of erosion of the global nuclear order began. For several decades, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), and START, etc., regulated the global nuclear order by placing transparency measures, legally binding limits, data exchanges, and verification measures. The expiry of the NEW START, the last of such agreements in February 2026, has practically left the global nuclear order rudderless, as the United States and Russia are no longer tied up in any constraint regarding their weapon systems. This, in all likelihood, would result in a renewed global arms race. China's military modernization, including its nuclear advancement, is also to be taken into account. This strategic landscape is further complicated by the emergence of challenges to strategic stability in the shape of AI, cyber capabilities, and autonomous weapons systems.

These challenges would not only affect the global nuclear order but also raise several new challenges for regional nuclear dyads such as South Asia. Since 2014, India has been ruled by a Hindutva-motivated and driven Modi regime

[1] Charles Dickens, "A Tale of Two Cities," (London: Penguin, 2004) p. 1

that has demonstrated the tendency to use war and nuclear weapons to achieve political ends.

This paper aims to understand the historical evolution of the global nuclear order and how it contributed to nuclear nonproliferation and ensuring strategic stability. Using this as a background, the paper then situates the South Asian nuclear dyad in the established nuclear norms and nuclear risk reduction measures, as well as practices, by looking at the existing CBMs between India and Pakistan and how they have fared historically. The paper also addresses how the Modi regime's risk-taking behavior has adversely affected strategic stability between India and Pakistan and how the challenges posed by the emerging technologies, AI, and enhanced cyber capabilities would further affect this dynamic. At the end, the paper argues for the adoption of *Adverse Partnership* on strategic stability issues by India and Pakistan.

Global Nuclear Order

Post American nuclear attack on Japan in 1945, Bernard Brodie famously stated: 'Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on, its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.'[2] This, in essence, is what the existing global order is all about. In the early years of the first nuclear age, especially after the Soviet nuclear test, it was feared that several more countries would soon acquire nuclear weapons of their own, fulfilling Brodie's divination of a multilateral possession of the bomb. President Kennedy voiced a similar concern during his presidential campaign, stating: 'There are indications, because of new inventions, that ten, fifteen, or twenty nations will have a nuclear capacity, including Red China by the end of the presidential office in 1964.'[3] Therefore, in McGeorge Bundy's words, 'to cap the volcano,'[4] and to address the emerging dangers of a nuclear war, arms race, and possible proliferation of nuclear weapons to additional states, certain measures were initiated by Washington that over the years turned into what is now known as the global nuclear order. An order that in its essence is

[2] Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946)

[3] "Debate Transcript: The Third Kennedy–Nixon Presidential Debate," October 13, 1960, *Commission on Presidential Debates*, https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-13-1960-debate-transcript/

[4] McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48, no. 1 (October 1969): 1–20

based on organized hypocrisy[5] is described by Lawrence Freedman as based on 'twin pillars': *nonproliferation to prevent or halt nuclear proliferation*, and *strategic stability between the USA and USSR* in the ensuing nuclear rivalry.[6]

First pillar of Global Nuclear Order: Nuclear Nonproliferation

The 1954 US Atomic Energy Act serves as the foundational document of this pillar. The Act established the American Atomic Energy for Peace program, which permits and facilitates the process of American support and help to willing global partners in using atomic energy for peaceful purposes. In 1957, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was created to promote the peaceful use of nuclear energy. To address the issue of proliferation, multilateral negotiations were conducted by the US and the erstwhile USSR (now Russia) in 1965 that culminated in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which came into effect in March 1970. The NPT is arguably the most important treaty of the global nuclear and nonproliferation order, with more than 191 members at present. Noted exceptions are India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel. New Delhi's peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE) dubbed the Smiling Buddha in 1974 resulted in an understanding that stringent export control measures are required to ensure that nuclear technology transferred to countries to be used in civilian nuclear programs and peaceful purposes could not be used for any other purpose, including a peaceful nuclear explosion. For this, a series of meetings was held in London between the US, USSR (now Russia), United Kingdom (UK), France, Japan, Canada, and West Germany. This development resulted in the establishment of the London Club in 1975, which morphed into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 1978 and the guidelines of the group were published by the IAEA as an Information Circular INFCIRC/254.[7]

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[5] Zeb, Rizwan. "International Non-proliferation Regime and Organised Hypocrisy." *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 10, no. 1 (2024): 57–71. https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.0010.01.0310

[6] Lawrence Freedman, "The Interplay Between the International System and the Global Nuclear Order," in *Meeting the Challenges of the New Nuclear Age: Nuclear Weapons in a Changing Global Order*, ed. Steven E. Miller, Robert Legvold, and Lawrence Freedman (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2019), 62–75, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2019_New-Nuclear-Age_Changing-Global-Order.pdf

[7] International Atomic Energy Agency, *Communication Received from the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan to the International Atomic Energy Agency Regarding Certain Member States' Guidelines for the Export of Nuclear Material, Equipment and Technology*,

Despite several flaws, impediments, and failures, the NPT managed to achieve its main objective of keeping the number of nuclear-weapon states to a minimum, contrary to Brodie's projected multilateral ownership of nuclear weapons and President Kennedy's prediction of twenty nuclear states. In 2026, there are only nine nuclear states in the world. Five states that are recognized by the NPT as nuclear-weapon states are the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China. India and Pakistan tested their nuclear devices in 1998 while staying outside the NPT. North Korea acceded to the NPT in 1985, withdrew in 1993, and conducted its first nuclear test in 2006. Israel is believed to have possessed nuclear weapons since 1968 in opacity and has never joined the NPT. Although the five Nuclear Weapon States refused to disarm (one of the main pillars and agreements under the NPT), and continue to enhance their arsenals, which is one of the main reasons for the NPT failure despite having a broader consensus on the issue of non-proliferation. Due to its utility and significance, after the expiry of its mandated 25-year term, NPT was extended indefinitely in 1995. Along with NPT, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) that germinated out of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was also a significant step forward addressing this pillar of the global nuclear order. The CTBT would have, as the name entails, prohibited all types of nuclear tests. However, it was effectively killed by the US when its Senate refused to rectify it. At present, the progress on this pillar is practically stalled due to the continued deadlock on the NPT's progress and disagreement over the status of a treaty on fissile material. Furthermore, the US President Donald Trump recently openly contemplated and stated[8] that Washington might resume nuclear testing.

Second Pillar of Global Nuclear Order: Strategic Stability

After the Soviet nuclear test of 1949 and several crises throughout the 1950s, such as the Berlin crises (1948-49 and 1958-61), Quemoy and Matsu crises (1954-55 and 1958), the Korean War (1950-53), the possibility of a nuclear exchange arose. During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the US and USSR came very close to a nuclear war. In the words of then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, pure and simple luck saved the world from a

INFCIRC/254/Rev.14/Part 1a (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, October 18, 2019), https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/infcircs/1978/infcirc254r14p1.pdf

[8] "Trump says US Will Resume Nuclear Testing," *Arms Control Today*, November 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-11/news-briefs/trump-says-us-will-resume-nuclear-testing

possible nuclear holocaust.[9] The back channel between Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and President Kennedy's brother Robert Kennedy played a vital role in the resolution of the crisis. The crisis made both the Americans and the Soviets realize the significance of strategic stability, as any crisis instability could push either side to opt for the option of striking first to accrue maximum advantage. Thomas Schelling opined, 'Fear that the other may be about to strike in the mistaken belief that we are about to strike gives us a motive for striking, and so justifies the other's motive.'[10] A positive impact of this crisis was that it started a process that culminated with several nuclear arms control and risk-reduction Measures between the US and USSR. The first was the establishment of a Direct Communications Link, also known as the Hotline, between the two in 1963.[11] This eventually transformed into Nuclear Risk-Reduction Centers. This was followed by a series of arms control agreements between the two.[12] As the Cold War was inching towards its end, in 1987, both sides signed the INF Treaty. As per the treaty, both sides agreed to destroy all land-based nuclear and conventional missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km.

Soon after the disintegration of the USSR, Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, through the Soviet Threat Reduction Act of 1991, initiated the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program aimed at securing and dismantling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the erstwhile USSR. It also denuclearized former Soviet states Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Ukraine. On 31 July 1991, START-I was signed. Two years later, on 3 January 1993, START -II was signed. However, the positive moment was lost in the coming years as the Helsinki framework never actually materialized, and START-III remained just an idea. President Bush's assumption of office in 2000 was a further setback in this regard as his administration viewed arms

[9] Errol Morris, dir., *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2004), film

[10]Schelling, Thomas C., The Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1958. https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P1342.html

[11] "Memorandum of Understanding Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Regarding the Establishment of a Direct Communications Link," June 20, 1963, *US Department of State*, https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/4785.htm

[12] Jozef Goldblat, *Arms Control: The New Guide to Negotiations and Agreements* (London: Sage Publications, 2002)

control as a relic of the Cold War and wanted to get rid of these restraints.[13] It became apparent in 2002, when on 14 June 2002, Washington withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty). As a consequence, Moscow withdrew from the START II agreement.

With President Obama taking the helm of affairs in Washington in 2009, the New START was negotiated. In this decade, the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) and the 2010 New START with Russia were reached. The New START came into force on 5 February 2011 with a term of 10 years and was eventually extended in February 2021[14] despite Trump administration not pursuing it.[15] The INF Treaty was terminated on August 2, 2019, due to the US withdrawal.

Figure 1; Major US–Soviet/Russian Arms Control Treaties [16]

[13] Christopher A. Ford, "A New Paradigm: Shattering Obsolete Thinking on Arms Control and Nonproliferation," *Arms Control Today*, November 2008, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008-11/features/new-paradigm-shattering-obsolete-thinking-arms-control-and-nonproliferation

[14] Andrew C. Winner, "The Second Death of Arms Control," *Survival* 68, no. 2 (April-May 2026): 73–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2026.2647639

[15] Steven Pifer, "Don't Let New START Die," *Order from Chaos*, The Brookings Institution, February 6, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/dont-let-new-start-die/

[16] Ben Aris, "New START Missile Treaty Expires," *bne IntelliNews*, February 5, 2026, https://www.intellinews.com/new-start-missile-treaty-expires-424313/?source=russia

With the return of the great power competition, the US, having a first-use doctrine, reiterated a role for its nuclear weapons that extends beyond deterring nuclear attacks.[17] President Trump is on record as saying that Washington would retaliate to a large-scale cyber-attack with a nuclear strike. Moscow, on its part, is modernizing and improving its arsenal. While China continues to be an outlier from all such arrangements.

With the expiry of New START in February 2026, the future of global arms control is not only bleak but uncertain. For the first time since the Cold War, the regulations and limitations embodied in different arms control agreements that regulated the great power competition have ended. This end is marked with renewed, more complex, and multilayered distrust, arms race, and crisis instability. Furthermore, all this has happened when several new challenges have emerged, which are capable of transforming our understanding and conduct of war, diplomacy, and crisis communication.

With the advent of AI, Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs), advances in surveillance, accuracy, and lethality, coupled with enhanced capabilities, have made the survivability of deterrent forces into question.[18] Advancements in cyber capabilities and modern weapon systems like the hypersonic glide vehicle have generated dilemmas for command and control (C2) systems and shrunk the time for the decision makers to determine whether an incoming strike is conventional or nuclear and to decide their response. At present, more than numbers, it is the impact of these capabilities that would not only compress the timeline but also blur the conventional-nuclear threshold.

With advanced and improved capabilities, precision targeting, and conventional capabilities to target the strategic targets, including the C2 centers and conventional/nuclear interface, overlap is becoming a reality day by day, which gravely erodes strategic stability.[19] Nowhere are these apprehensions more pronounced than in South Asia, a region broadly recognized and extensively documented as one of the world's most volatile

[17] Rizwan Zeb, "Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review and American Nuclear Policy: A Critical Overview," *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 1 (2023): 53–66, https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/index.php/site/article/view/151

[18] James M. Acton, "Escalation Through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War," *International Security* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 56–99, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00320

[19] Ibid

nuclear flashpoints. Since 2014, India has been ruled by a Hindutva-motivated and driven regime that has demonstrated more than once the tendency to use war and nuclear weapons for political purposes and that refuses not only to engage with Pakistan in a dialogue but is also unwilling to accept that there is any need for it.

Nuclear Risk Reduction Measures and CBMs between India and Pakistan

Since 1947, when India and Pakistan gained their independence, they have been engaged in an enduring rivalry and a paired minority conflict.[20] According to Stephen Philip Cohen, in such conflicts, both sides (in this case India and Pakistan) perceive themselves as a vulnerable minority and threatened by the other side. This perception makes any possibility of compromise difficult.[21]

The bilateral relationship is characterized by continued hostilities, distrust and both have engaged each other militarily. In 1998, the nuclear factor was included in this conflict when India gatecrashed into the nuclear club by testing its nuclear devices in May 1998 while staying outside the NPT. Within weeks, Pakistan followed suit due to its security compulsions. The uncertainty and unreliability of intentions, lack of proper communication mechanisms, ever-present hostility, and urge for a military confrontation were compounded by the nuclear capability. This resulted in a global concern that any future crisis between the two might escalate to a nuclear war.

With this realization, Pakistan's then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif invited Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Lahore in 1999. During this visit, New Delhi and Islamabad agreed on a framework for a nuclear dialogue and address the nuclear risks as well as the role of CBMs and arms control agreements in the nuclear environment. After a hiatus, when the Indo-Pak dialogue resumed in 2004, seven rounds of bilateral discussions on arms control and strategic issues were conducted as part of the India-

[20] TV Paul, "Causes of the India–Pakistan Enduring Rivalry," in *The India–Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry*, ed. T. V. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3–26

[21]Stephen P. Cohen, *India, Pakistan and Kashmir* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2001), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/cohens20011201.pdf

Pakistan composite dialogue process. The last round was held in 2012. Since then, no dialogue has taken place.

CBMs between India and Pakistan

The following CBMs are in place between India and Pakistan:

i) ***Director General of Military Operations (DGMOs) Hotline:*** After the 1971 war, a hotline was established between the Director General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan. It was modelled on the 1963 Washington-Moscow hotline. The highest level of military contact between India and Pakistan, it is used both in times of peace and conflict. More recently, it was used during Operation Sindoor.[22]

ii) ***The Nuclear Non-Attack Agreement***: In 1988, India and Pakistan reached an agreement on not attacking each other's nuclear installations. As part of this agreement, both sides share lists of nuclear facilities on January 1 each year. A practice that has survived crises and hostilities thus far and could be considered the most successful CBM between the two countries.

iii) ***Prime Ministers' Hotline***: In 1989, a hotline was established between the prime ministers of India and Pakistan. It was used by Prime Ministers Sharif and Vajpayee during the Kargil conflict. Since then, its usage during any crisis is not known.

iv) ***Foreign Secretaries' Hotline:*** After the resumption of the dialogue between India and Pakistan in 2004, a hotline was established between the Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan. However, as per the available record, it has not been used in any of the crises between the two countries.[23]

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[22] Moeed Yusuf and Rizwan Zeb, *A Quarter Century of Nuclear South Asia: Nuclear Noise, Signalling, and the Risk of Escalation in India-Pakistan Crises* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 3, 2026), https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/01/a-quarter-century-of-nuclear-south-asia-nuclear-india-pakistan-crises

[23] "Nuke Hotline for India, Pakistan: Nuclear Testing Ban Extended," *CNN International*, June 20, 2004, para. 8, https://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/asiapcf/06/20/india.pakistan/

v) ***Advance Notification of Ballistic Missile Tests:*** In 2005, both countries reached an agreement to provide advance notice before testing their ballistic missiles.

vi) ***Reducing the Risk from Accidents Relating to Nuclear Weapons:*** In 2007, India and Pakistan signed an agreement to notify each other of any accident relating to their nuclear weapons so that a response mechanism can be worked out and executed in time.

vii) ***Terror Hotline***: On 28 March 2011, a hotline was established between the Interior and home secretaries of India and Pakistan. It was aimed at facilitating the counter-terror activities by sharing real-time information. This is why it was dubbed as the terror hotline.[24]

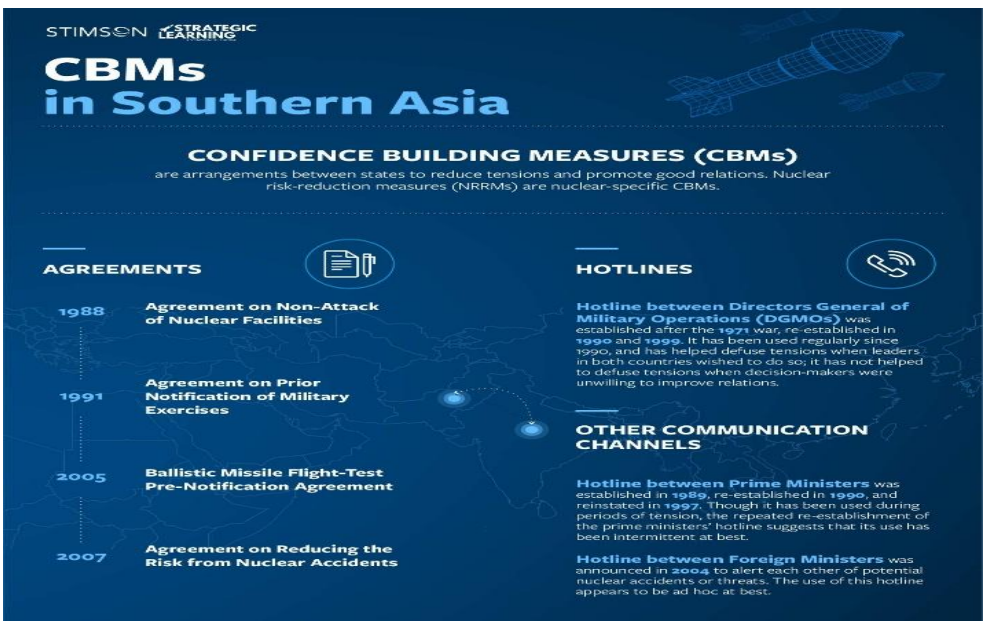

Figure 2; CBMS in South Asia [25]

[24] "India, Pakistan Agree to 'Terror Hotline'," *The Express Tribune*, March 29, 2011, https://tribune.com.pk/story/139313/india-pakistan-agree-to-terror-hotline

[25] Betzalel Newman, "Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis," *Stimson Center*, May 19, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis/

CBMs between India and Pakistan: Problems and Challenges

How have these agreements and measures fared thus far? Have these served their purpose and produced the desired outcome? The scorecard is mixed. As regards the agreement of non-attack, it has survived thus far, and both sides share the lists on January 1 each year regardless of the situation. How regularly these lists are updated is not known. The symbolism is commendable. Unfortunately, this cannot be said about the other CBMs. In most of the crises, the communications channels between the two are the first casualty. Apart from the DGMOs hotline, the PM hotline was only used in one conflict, while there is nothing available in open sources about the hotlines between the foreign secretaries and interior secretaries ever being used. Furthermore, the pre-test notification agreement needs to be updated as it does not include cruise missiles. More so, there is no mechanism existing for review and audit of the functioning of these CBMs and how to further improve them. All this, however, became totally irrelevant with the change of guard in New Delhi in 2014.

Self-proclaimed Vishwaguru: Modi, Risk Reduction and Nuclear CBMs with Pakistan

The BJP won the 16th Lok Sabha elections held in May 2014. Narendra Modi, rising from Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ranks, who, as Chief Minister of Gujarat, put his full support behind the rioters during the Gujarat massacre, earning him notoriety as the butcher of Gujarat, became the prime minister. He projected himself as the strongman who stands as a muscular defender of the Hindu majority. After becoming the prime minister of India, he continued his politics of hatred centered around Hindutva, Anti-Indian Muslim, and Anti-Pakistan and India under him as Vishwaguru (global teacher).

Modi's View of Pakistan

For Modi and his cronies, Pakistan is a failed state and an unviable project, contending that it would collapse, fragment, turn into a failed state, be reabsorbed into India, or another such failed scenario, and that India ought to encourage it.[26] According to Satish Kumar: '…Islamic extremism and militancy have become an important reality in Pakistan… There is a

[26] Neil Padukone, *Beyond South Asia: India's Strategic Evolution and the Reintegration of the Subcontinent* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014)

symbolic relationship between them that cannot be wished away. Both of them are hostile to India and acting in unison; their hostility will remain formidable.'[27] He further states: '…Pakistan poses a long-term security threat to India, which is inherent in the Pakistani state, its ideology, its power structure, and the imperatives that determine the behavior of the ruling establishment. These factors are not likely to change in the next couple of decades. India has to cope with this kind of adversary and its strategic capabilities and thinking, its national will and character must respond to the situation accordingly.'[28] Whereas according to Karnard, 'A nuclear Pakistan, however much it huffs and it puffs, can still only end up imitating Thackeray's frog trying to blow itself up to ox-size.'[29] He is of the view that Pakistan has to accept the fact that India is a global player. As Pakistan, according to Karnard: '…is fated by geography and, as an appendage of the mainstream sub-continental culture, to always remain in India's shadow, strategically and otherwise. Even its role as a sub-regional spoiler and mischief-maker depends wholly on India's continued unwillingness to act its size, exercise the full range of policy options open to it, and single-mindedly and uncompromisingly pursue its legitimately expansive national interests and objectives.[30] His recipe for dealing with Pakistan is: 'The absolute irrelevance of nuclear weapons to deal with Pakistan, a lower riparian State, in the most extreme way is contained in the fact that its granary, the Punjab province, can be turned into an arid wasteland by India's withdrawing from the I960 Indus Waters Treaty, and diverting and damming the waters flowing from the headwaters of the Indus River on the Indian side.'[31] The above political views very clearly suggest India's hatred-led and violence-prone political mindset towards the Pakistani state.

Modi's New Delhi has taken the position that if Islamabad wants to have a meaningful dialogue for a lasting peace between India and Pakistan, it must first stop the alleged cross-border terrorism, dismantle the alleged terror infrastructure, and agree to several preconditions set by New Delhi. In other

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[27] Satish Kumar, "Reassessing Pakistan as a Long-Term Security Threat," in Veena Kukreja and M. P. Singh, eds., *Pakistan Democracy, Development and Security Issues,* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005)

[28] Ibid

[29] Bharat Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security: The Realist Foundations of Strategy* (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 2002)

[30] Ibid

[31] Ibid

words, Islamabad has to accept India's dominant position in the region before it can engage with Islamabad.[32]

Built upon the above terrorism-centric blame narrative, India aims to underpin its regional hegemonic ambitions through force modernization, doctrinal transformation, and the employment of coercive military strategies, while simultaneously depicting Pakistan as a source of regional instability. This narrative has, in turn, provided strategic justification for India's conduct of its so-called surgical strikes against Pakistan in 2019 and subsequently in 2025, as is discussed below.

Pulwama 2019, Mian Chuno 2022 and Sindoor 2025

Modi's perception and attitude towards Pakistan are visible in how he handled the three most recent crises between India and Pakistan. On 14 February 2019, a young Kashmiri boy rammed an explosive-laden car into a military convey killing 44 Indian paramilitary personnel and wounding more than 70. On 26 February 2019, India, instead of focusing on internal security breaches, externalized the event, claiming that the Indian Air Force had attacked, targeted, and destroyed an alleged Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp in Balakot in Pakistan, resulting in a huge number of deaths. However, it was soon proven to be incorrect. The next day, Islamabad responded by locking on a key military installation and then targeting an empty area to signal its capability, but opting not to escalate. In the ensuing air battle, the PAF jammed the communication link of the IAF MiG and shot it down. The Indian pilot was arrested. In the fog of the war, the IAF panicked, and Indian ground air defence shot down one of its own Russian Mi-17V5 'Hip' medium lift helicopters, killing six service officials and one civilian.[33] India also mobilized its Navy and deployed an Indian Navy task force, including INS Vikramaditya, in the north Arabian Sea. Ironically, the Indian Navy could not locate the Pakistan Navy's Agosta-90-B submarine throughout the crisis. Whereas Pakistan Navy's P-3C Orion aircraft compelled the Indian Navy's most advanced Scorpene-class submarine to surface.

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[32] Rizwan Zeb, Shahbaz Ahmed Shahzad, and Muhammad Alam, "New Delhi's Pakistan Dilemma and the Indo-Pakistan Peace Process," *Global Legal Studies Review* 6, no. 1 (2021): 17–26, https://doi.org/10.31703/glsr.2021(VI-I).03

[33] Abhishek Bhalla, "Budgam Mi-17 Crash: IAF Chief Admits Big Mistake, Says Our Own Missile Hit Chopper," *India Today*, February 10, 2022, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/budgam-mi-17-crash-iaf-chief-admits-big-mistake-1606217-2019-10-04

Then Indian High Commissioner to Islamabad, Ajay Bisaria, reported that at one point during the crisis, Imran Khan, then Prime Minister, attempted to speak directly to Modi, but the Indian side refused, instead suggesting that if there was an urgent message, it should be conveyed through Bisaria.[34] This reflects how Indian leadership (particularly in this case, Modi), amid such a crisis, deals with a nuclear adversary. Just imagine if a similar approach had been adopted by Khrushchev or Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis.[35]

Another event occurred in 2022. According to several Pakistani media sources, on the evening of 9 March 2022, Pakistan Air Force (PAF) picked up and began tracking a high-speed flying object launched from the Indian town of Sirsa. After a while, it sharply changed course and maneuvered towards Pakistani territory and fell near Mian Channu, a city within Pakistani Punjab's Khanewal district.[36] The next day, the Director-General of Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) held a press briefing about the incident. According to a media report:

> PAF continuously monitored the complete flying path of the object, from its point of origin near Sirsa in India to its point of impact, near Mian Channu. It initiated requisite tactical actions,' … It is important to highlight that the flight path of this object endangered many international and domestic passenger flights both in Indian and Pakistani airspace, as well as human life and property on the ground. Whatever caused this incident to happen, it is

[34] Moeed Yusuf and Rizwan Zeb, *A Quarter Century of Nuclear South Asia: Nuclear Noise, Signalling, and the Risk of Escalation in India-Pakistan Crises* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 3, 2026), 25, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/01/a-quarter-century-of-nuclear-south-asia-nuclear-india-pakistan-crises, Rafique Mangat, "Imran Tried to Talk to Modi After Balakot Airstrikes: Ex-Envoy," *The News International*, January 10, 2024, https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1146400-imran-tried-to-talk-to-modi-after-balakot-airstrikes-ex-envoy

[35] Ibid

[36] Asif Shahzad, Krishna N. Das, and Gibran Naiyyar Peshimam, "India Says It Accidentally Fired Missile into Pakistan," *Reuters*, March 11, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-seeks-answers-india-after-crash-mystery-flying-object-2022-03-10/, Rahul Bedi, "A Military Whodunnit: India's Inquiry into the Missile Launch Calamity Needs to Be Swift," *The Wire*, March 13, 2022, https://thewire.in/security/indias-missile-pakistan-iaf-security-diplomacy, Nirupama Subramanian, "Pakistan Seeks Joint Probe After India Misfires Missile," *The Indian Express*, March 13, 2022, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/day-after-india-cites-technical-malfunction-for-missile-firing-pakistan-joint-probe-7816730/

> for the Indians to explain. It, nevertheless, shows their disregard for aviation safety and reflects very poorly on their technological prowess and procedural efficiency, he said, adding that this could have resulted in a major aviation disaster.[37]

While this was happening or even afterwards, New Delhi made no effort or attempt to inform Islamabad through the use of the formal DGMO and/ or foreign secretary hotlines, or any other regular or backchannels. New Delhi stayed mum for two days as if nothing had happened, or it was of no importance or consequence. The Indian Ministry of Defence finally woke up and admitted that an Indian missile was accidentally launched during routine maintenance and crossed into Pakistan. Six days after the incident, on 15 March, during his address in the parliament, the Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh acknowledged the inadvertent release of a missile into the house, claiming that it was later known that the missile fell in Pakistan's territory.[38]

Indian Defence Minister's speech to the Indian Parliament brings to the fore several worrisome and alarming points about communication between the two nuclear adversaries and the Modi regime's approach and policy of dealing with such incidents. His statement confirms that New Delhi made no attempt to inform Islamabad of this so-called accident while the nuclear-capable missile was in flight, and went off course. Was it because New Delhi decided not to inform Islamabad and withhold this information, or because it failed to monitor the missile's flight? The former implies New Delhi's inability to handle sensitive technology, while the latter points to an alarming gap in communication in the South Asian nuclear dyad. Either way, this bodes negatively for strategic stability between India and Pakistan. Furthermore, the incident highlights serious trepidations about New Delhi's fail-safe mechanism as well as the command-and-control functioning of its missiles.

The subsequent event between India and Pakistan erupted in May 2025. The Pahalgam crisis led to a four-day war between the two nuclear rivals,

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[37] "India to Explain What Happened in Mian Channu, says DG ISPR After Indian Projectile Falls in Pakistan," *Dawn*, March 10, 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1679289

[38]"Rajnath Singh Addresses Rajya Sabha on Accidentally-Fired Missile That Landed in Pakistan," *NDTV*, March 15, 2022, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/budget-session-live-updates-2022-rajnath-singh-to-address-parliament-on-accidentally-fired-missile-that-landed-in-pakistan-2823197

culminating in one of the most serious escalations in nuclearized South Asia. On the night of May 6-7, 2025, India, in disregard of international law, deployed its strategic superiority by launching attacks on Pakistani territory, claiming once again that it had targeted alleged terrorist camps in eight different locations across Pakistan under its so-called operation 'Sindoor.' Contrarily, the neutral reports clearly suggest that only civilians, women, and children came under the Indian attack. Pakistan, in turn, promptly retaliated in a measured and calculated manner. Pakistan swiftly gained escalation dominance as confrontation resulted between the two air forces, during which Pakistan shot down five Indian jets, including two French-made Rafale fighters, without entering the Indian airspaces. India reacted again by targeting various locations within Pakistani territory, including the Nur Khan Air Base in Rawalpindi, but failed to inflict any substantial damage. Pakistan, in response, successfully shot down hundreds of Indian drones flying deep into its mainland. Pakistan, in turn, launched 'Operation Bunyanum Marsoo' (Iron Wall), striking critical Indian military targets, i.e., Brahmos missile sites, several Indian air bases, and even reportedly damaging the Russian-made S-400 air defense system. On the land surface, Pakistani land forces also reportedly captured multiple Indian military posts across the Line of Control (LoC) in the Illegally Occupied Indian Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K).

As the conflict intensified, global apprehension also mounted. On the fourth day of aggression, on May 10, 2025, the US President Donald Trump intervened, at India's request, and brokered a cease-fire after wide-ranging consultations with both the rival states. The night of May 7 was a glaring example of India's false sense of superiority in its airpower and modern technologies. Despite fielding 72 Indian fighter jets, as compared to Pakistan's 42 aircraft, India could not establish aerial dominance and failed to achieve escalation dominance against a comparatively smaller force. The aerial battle undermined India's technological superiority and its overrated political confidence for the second time since 2014 under the ruling government of the BJP.

Operation Sindoor demonstrated the Modi-led trimurti's reckless and risk-prone behavior, in which not engaging its nuclear adversary is the key element. This approach is alarming and bodes negatively for strategic stability between India and Pakistan. Despite having the privilege of hindsight and knowing well from the Cold War experience what could be the consequences of not implementing arms control and risk reduction

measures, Modi, it appears, is intentionally pushing the region towards strategic instability.

New Challenges

As discussed in an early section of the paper, for the first time since the Cold War, there is no arrangement in existence or in place to regulate nuclear weapons globally. At present, the global geostrategic landscape is marked by unstable rivalries and minimal restraint. The emergence and integration of AI and emerging technologies in systems such as hypersonic weapons and missile defense have further complicated the strategic landscape. Cyber operations and AI-enabled command systems have further compressed the time for decision-making, increasing the risk of miscalculation.

South Asia is no alien to the fact that cyber and AI would generate a new complex set of risks to an already intrinsically complex strategic environment. As early as 2008, India and Pakistan narrowly escaped escalation due to a hoax call allegedly by the Indian defence minister to the president of Pakistan in the wake of the Mumbai terror incident. We have witnessed the induction and demonstration of (some of the) emerging technologies during the Pahalgam conflict. At present, both India and Pakistan are investing in such technologies, especially unmanned technologies to further augment their war-fighting capabilities. As there is a well-documented absence of communication between India and Pakistan, primarily due to Modi's policy, the induction of more effective and lethal cyber capabilities, any cyber-attack on the C2 system in South Asia would result in miscalculation and inadvertent escalation. More so, AI-led tools, hypersonic missiles, autonomous drones, and precision-strike systems could lead to the entanglement of conventional and nuclear domains that would have catastrophic consequences for both states.

Furthermore, the geographical position increases such risks multifold as there are limited early-warning capabilities and very little missile flight time, leaving the leaders with no option but to take instant decision. All this is compounded by the fact that communication measures between the two have historically been the first victim of crises, and since Modi took the helm of affairs, his indifference to CBMs, risk-reduction measures, including avoiding dialogue with Pakistan, has made the situation even more complex.

Conclusion

Is there a way forward? In such a situation, the most realistic course of action for India and Pakistan is to develop an understanding of the threat of disruptive and dual-use technologies and work out new nuclear confidence-building measures (NCBMs), as well as revise and augment the existing but dormant CBMs. The best and practical course of action would be establishing a Nuclear Risk Reduction Center for coordinating crisis management, promoting communication, and minimizing the risk of inadvertent and/ or accidental escalation. However, whether the Modi regime would agree to it is everybody's guess. During the height of the Cold War, Schelling and Halperin pointed out that the essential feature of arms control is the recognition of the common interest and the possibility of cooperation between rivals.[39] This is what the Modi regime needs to understand, learn, and accept. What this paper proposes is that New Delhi and Islamabad should develop an *Adverse Partnership*[40] on strategic stability issues and the potential threat associated with AI and emerging technologies. By doing this, Modi would not be doing any favor to Islamabad but would be avoiding what is otherwise written on the wall. The Modi regime should realize that there might not be a Colonel *Stanislav Petrov* in the case of India and Pakistan. As Thomas Schelling once stated, accidents do not cause war. Decisions cause war.[41] It is high time that correct decisions are taken in South Asia.

[39] Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), xi, 1–3, quoted in Andrew C. Winner, "The Second Death of Arms Control," *Survival* 68, no. 2 (April–May 2026): 74, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2026.2647639

[40] Rizwan Zeb, "Pakistan and Afghanistan, 2014 and Beyond: Not Friends, Not Yet Enemies?," *Journal of South Asian Development* 8, no. 2 (2013): 165–183, https://doi.org/10.1177/0973174113494599

[41] Thomas C. Schelling, "Meteors, Mischief, and War," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 16, no. 7 (September 1960): 293.

Exploring Potential Models and Trajectories for Future Arms Control Architecture in a Multipolar World

Sufian Ullah*

Abstract

With the demise of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the international security environment has entered a new stage in which nuclear powers are engaged in unrestrained strategic competition without the discipline of legally binding arms control agreements-an unprecedented situation since the beginning of the nuclear age. This development occurs in the backdrop of the gradual transformation of the global strategic environment towards a predominantly complex multipolar structure that entails multiple strategic competitors with intensifying geopolitical rivalries, along with rapid advancements in disruptive technologies intersecting with nuclear deterrence. This paper offers an analytical assessment of the impact of these changes on future arms control architecture. It examines the transition of the international security environment towards a multipolar order and shows how it differs from the past. It analyses the relevance of arms control as a policy option in a complex multipolar structure and identifies the underlying rationale behind arms control remaining the same. However, the new objectives must incorporate contemporary challenges arising from multi-actor deterrence dynamics, rapid technological advancements, and interconnectedness between nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities. The article further explores potential models for future arms control architecture by examining the prospects and limitations of trilateral, bilateral, and unilateral approaches. The paper particularly focuses on the United States' (US) view of China as a potential nuclear peer whose advancing capabilities shape the former's threat perception as well as arms control

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choices, especially in the context of Beijing and Moscow. The paper argues that despite the challenges confronting the prospects of legally binding arms control measures between great powers, the prevailing instabilities in the contemporary security environment necessitate exploring flexible, specific, and modular arms control measures which could enhance transparency and predictability.

Keywords: Arms Control, Multipolar World, New START, Nuclear Deterrence, Strategic Stability.

Introduction

Contrary to the past, when the arms control treaties were considered the main pillar of strategic stability and balance of power among the antagonistic states,[1] it no longer seems a priority for competing powers in the present evolving multipolar world. Arms control depends on shared understanding among adversaries regarding the sources of strategic stability and instability. With intensifying major power competition, states respond to respective threat perceptions and adopt divergent strategic doctrines. This, in turn, undermines the prospects of arms control by weakening the consensus on what constitutes a stable strategic balance, what needs to be regulated, and how to ensure compliance. This is evident from the termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 and the end of the New START, the last bilateral arrangement that constrained the nuclear weapons of Russia and the US, on 5 February 2026, amidst the continuous modernization of weapons in the US, Russian, and Chinese arsenals.[2] The contemporary era is the first time in decades when there are no limits for the nuclear-weapon states to deploy nuclear weapons on their delivery systems.[3]

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[1] Adam Daniel Rotfeld, "The Future of Arms Control and International Security," in *A Future of Arms Control Agenda: Proceedings of Nobel Symposium 118, 1999*, ed. Ian Anthony and Adam Daniel Rotfeld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4

[2] Jennifer Knox, "Nuclear Weapons without Limits: Avoiding a New Arms Race after New START," *Union of Concerned Scientists*, January 2026, https://www.ucs.org/sites/default/files/2026-01/Nuclear-Weapons-Without-Limits.pdf, 28 May 2026

[3] Geoff Brumfiel and Charles Maynes, "For the first time in decades, the US and Russia have no limits on nuclear weapons," *National Public Radio*, 5 February 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/02/04/nx-s1-5697382/new-start-nuclear-treaty-expired-us-

While Beijing's increasing number of nuclear warheads has come under significant focus[4], the US intends to deploy Golden Dome, a multilayered missile defense system that also includes space-based interceptors.[5] This could lead to a heightened space-based arms race with increasing risks of nuclear war as well as conflict in space.[6] These developments are happening in the worrisome backdrop of rescinding arms control commitments, lack of serious dialogue among major powers to discuss arms control and strategic stability, growing propensity towards use of force in regional conflicts, increasing skepticism among non-nuclear weapons states regarding the US extended deterrence commitments as well as nuclear weapons states' inaction to pursue disarmament as required under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Experts note that with the slowing pace of dismantlement of retired warheads, there is a 'clear trend of growing nuclear arsenals'.[7] More so, advancements in disruptive technologies further lead to complexities by undermining the effectiveness of existing norms and regulations.[8] By facilitating communication and predictability, arms control helps establish trust among competing powers. Conversely, lack of predictability not only contributes to unconstrained arms competition but also complicates the escalation pathways during potential military crises involving nuclear-weapon states.

This article carries three parts. In the first part, it provides a reasoning for the relevance of arms control in the Multipolar World. In the second part, it assesses the potential of future arms control mechanisms, correlating it to

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russia#:~:text=At%20midnight%20on%20Thursday%2C%20a,on%20missiles%2C%20bombers%20and%20submarines,28 May 2026

[4] Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, "Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2025," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol 81, No. 2 (2025), 135-160

[5] Robert Peters, "Missile Defense for the 21st Century," *The Heritage Foundation*, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/2026_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength_ASSESSMENT_POWER_MD.pdf

[6] Ankit Panda, "For homeland missile defense, think Golden Zones, not a Golden Dome," *Atlantic Council*, 21 March 2026, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/homeland-missile-defense-golden-zones-not-golden-dome/

[7] Hans M. Kristensen quoted in "Nuclear risks grow as new arms race looms—new SIPRI Yearbook out now," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 16 June 2025, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/nuclear-risks-grow-new-arms-race-looms-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now

[8] Manoj Harjani and Mei Ching Liu, "Navigating Uncertainty: Arms Control in an Age of Disruptive Technologies," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies*, January 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ER250123_MTP-Conference-2024.pdf

the present dynamics, while in the third section, it explores the implications and prospects and offers relevant recommendations.

Why Arms Control is relevant in the Multipolar World?

The nuclear arms control, as traditionally seen, was the product of a bipolar security environment signifying rivalry between the US and the former Soviet Union (now Russia) that differed from the current multipolar system in terms of arms control structure and practices. The bilateral arms control measures focused on strategic parity between the rival states that together possessed more than 90 percent of the total nuclear weapons in the world.[9] The bilateral arms control agreements, such as the INF Treaty and START, aimed to regulate the quantitative and qualitative aspects of nuclear competition to stabilize deterrence. This bilateral context largely shaped the conceptual understanding of deterrence, strategic stability, escalation, and crisis management.[10] It implied that due to mutual vulnerability between the two nuclear adversaries, neither of them could benefit from initiating and escalating a crisis, thus creating incentives for restraint and arms control.[11] Based on this policy relevance and theoretical foundations, a common understanding of escalation dynamics and crisis management emerged to establish the rationale behind pursuing arms control to avoid nuclear war.

Contrary to this bilateral context, one of the defining features of a multipolar order is the diffusion of power as well as military and technological capabilities, whereby power is no longer concentrated in a single or two superpowers, but rather among several powers, including China and other regional actors, who continue to influence the security environment. The nine states currently possess around 12,241 nuclear warheads, out of which 9,614 are estimated to be operational.[12] Unlike institutionalized and predictable deterrence architecture in the bipolar environment, multipolarity signifies asymmetrical force structures, a lack of consensus on the

[9] Nevine Schepers, "Russia's War and the Global Nuclear Order," *Policy Perspectives*, Vol 10, No 6 (2022): 1

[10] Steven E. Miller, "A Nuclear World Transformed: The Rise of Multilateral Disorder," *Dædalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, Vol. 149, No. 2 (2020): 18

[11] Andrew Futter, *The Politics of Nuclear Weapons* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

[12]Claire Mills, "Nuclear Weapons at a Glance," *House of Commons Library*, 14 January 2026, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9069/

foundational dimensions of strategic stability, and varying perceptions of vulnerability vis-à-vis perceived adversaries.[13]

Contending Factors

The above-discussed factors make arms control more relevant in a multipolar setting where the absence of regulatory regimes not only exacerbates the risks of an unabated arms race but has adverse implications for escalation dynamics by paving the way towards crisis instability and inadvertent escalation. While the regulatory mechanisms to ensure transparency and verification have already been weakened through the gradual erosion of formal treaties and agreements, the advancements in new technologies, including autonomous systems, cyber and space capabilities, hypersonic delivery systems, and so on, further complicate stability by blurring the distinctions between nuclear and conventional domains and reducing the decision-making time in the event of a crisis.[14]

Globally, the multipolar world order has transitioned to become more complex than the Cold War. The three key elements that define this evolutionary structural change include: a) the return of great power competition involving more than two major actors; b) the technological competition as being central to power politics; c) the rise of private companies as major actors in the development of dual-use technologies. The nuclear weapons states assess this changing environment as not conducive to reducing the reliance on nuclear weapons; the salience of deterrent capability has increased multifold in states' doctrines and postures.[15]

Regionally, different regional conflicts in recent years also signify the centrality of nuclear weapons in states' security calculus, as nuclear

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[13] Lawrence Rubin and Adam N. Stulberg, "*The End of Strategic Stability? Nuclear Weapons and the Challenges of Regional Rivalries"* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018)

[14] Sarah Grand-Clement, "Artificial Intelligence Beyond Weapons: Application and Impact of AI in the Military Domain," *United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)*, Geneva, 2023, https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/UNIDIR_AI_Beyond_Weapons_Application_Impact_AI_in_the_Military_Domain.pdf

[15] Lukasz Kulesa, "Reducing Global Reliance on Nuclear Deterrence," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, 23 December 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/insights-papers/reducing-global-reliance-nuclear-deterrence

deterrent capability is increasingly seen as a guarantor of national security.[16] The survival of North Korea, which has been able to sustain international pressure and deter aggression through nuclear capability, as compared to Iraq and Libya, is generally seen as an example signifying the effectiveness of nuclear weapons to deter external intervention. The Russia-Ukraine war has also spurred the debate in favor of nuclear deterrence as being the most credible security assurance against aggression, raising questions about Ukraine's renunciation of nuclear deterrent capability as a viable strategy.[17] Additionally, US President Donald J. Trump's statement regarding the possible resumption of nuclear testing by the US and likely responses from Moscow and Beijing also hint at the perceived need for modernization and growing salience of nuclear weapons.[18]

Simultaneously, there has been a growing tendency to use advanced military capabilities as tools of strategic competition, compellence, and coercive diplomacy.[19] During the war with Ukraine, Russia resorted to using nuclear signaling to deter external involvement and shape the adversarial behavior.[20] In South Asia, the May 2025 crisis between Pakistan and India witnessed how the acquisition of advanced weapons emboldened New Delhi to initiate a crisis.[21] Additionally, the growing questions about the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence for the transatlantic alliance and other allies in Asia have generated discussions about a greater role of French nuclear capabilities in Europe, as well as indigenous deterrent

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[16] Steven E. Miller; A Nuclear World Transformed: The Rise of Multilateral Disorder. *Daedalus* 2020; 149 (2): 17–36. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01787

[17] Sufian Ullah, "War in Iran and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime: A Perspective from Pakistan," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, March 25, 2026, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2026/03/war-in-iran-and-the-nuclear-nonproliferation-regime-a-perspective-from-pakistan/

[18] Łukasz Kulesa, "Reducing Global Reliance on Nuclear Deterrence," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, December 23, 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/insights-papers/reducing-global-reliance-nuclear-deterrence

[19] Terry Tracy, "Coercive Deterrence: Adapting Deterrence for Strategic Competition with China," *Parameters* 55, no. 3 (2025), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3355

[20] Kulesa, "Reducing Global Reliance on Nuclear Deterrence"

[21] Rabia Akhtar, "Conclusion: India's Doctrinal Drift and the End of Equilibrium," in *Strategic Reckoning: Perspectives on Deterrence and Escalation Post-Pahalgam – May 2025*, ed. Rabia Akhtar (Islamabad: The Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research, University of Lahore, and the Institute of Regional Studies, 2025), 325–327

capabilities for Japan and South Korea.[22] These trends coincide with ongoing modernization drives and expansion of military capabilities among major powers and signify that the salience of nuclear deterrence has increased in the contemporary era, leading to a more competitive nuclear landscape in the multipolar world. Such perceptions further strengthen the belief in the acquisition as well as modernization of nuclear weapons, necessitating the need to promote restraint. The absence of arms control arrangements, in addition to the divergent interests of states[23] in such a multipolar nuclear order, accelerates the arms race, which in turn leads to complex military postures that fuel uncertainty and the dangers of conflict escalation.

Implications

The complex interplay of these factors increases the ambiguities with respect to the intentions and actual capabilities of different states, thus leading to new challenges for strategic stability. While technological advancements continue at an unprecedented pace, the international efforts to regulate the development and use of advanced technologies like autonomous weapons systems have been underplayed for more than a decade, albeit with disagreements regarding the adoption of legally binding or informal initiatives to promote the responsible use of these technologies.[24]

The traditional functions of any arms control efforts, as identified by Jozef Goldblat, include regulation, limitation, risk reduction, and building confidence between antagonistic powers.[25] As argued by Thomas Schelling and Hedley Bull, arms control does not aim to replace deterrence with

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[22] Maximilian Hoell et al., "Extended Deterrence in a Multipolar World (Workshop Summary)," *Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory*, March 25–26, 2025, https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2025-05/Extended%20Deterrence%20in%20a%20Multipolar-Nuclear-World-Workshop-Summary.pdf

[23] Dalton, T. (2022). Plus, Ça Change? Prospects of a Nuclear Deterrence Multipolarity in Southern Asia. *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, *5*(2), 243–261. https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2158702

[24] Kühn, U., & Williams, H. (2025). Governing the impact of emerging technologies: Actors, technologies, and regulation. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *48*(3), 559–570. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2025.2472213

[25] Mathews RJ, McCormack TLH. The influence of humanitarian principles in the negotiation of arms control treaties. *Revue Internationale de la Croix-Rouge/International Review of the Red Cross*. 1999;81(834):331-352. doi:10.1017/S1560775500097431

alternative strategies; it aims to stabilize the strategies of deterrence.[26] While retaining the traditional underlying logic, any arms control efforts in the future may focus specifically on pursuing a set of objectives in light of unfolding multipolar dynamics and strategic complexities. Based on the synthesis of existing literature, policy debates, and proposals put forth by different states at different international fora, the following objectives of arms control are identified to address the complex challenges of multipolarity:

- Managing the destabilizing impact of advanced military capabilities that compress the decision-making cycle, often explained through the observation-orientation-decision-action (OODA loop) metaphor, leaving less time for decision-making and increasing the chances of inadvertent escalation.[27]
- Ensuring transparency and limiting the unconstrained quantitative and qualitative arms buildup.[28] This may include limiting a certain type of weapons, delivery systems, and even the development as well as the integration of emerging and disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence to reduce the possible destabilizing impact on strategic stability.[29]
- Regulating the operational posture as well as deployment of military forces to enhance crisis stability by decreasing escalation pressures and risks generated by new technologies.[30]
- Establishing institutional frameworks and mutually respected norms to govern military use of advanced capabilities in new domains of conflict, including cyber and outer space.[31]

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[26] Robert Ayson, *Hedley Bull and the Accommodation of Power* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

[27] Johnson, J. (2023). "Automating the OODA loop in the age of intelligent machines: reaffirming the role of humans in command-and-control decision-making in the digital age". *Defence Studies*, *23*(1), 43–67. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2022.2102486

[28] Andrew Facini, "The Past and Future of Deterrence Is Arms Control," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 13, 2026, https://thebulletin.org/premium/2026-05/the-past-and-future-of-deterrence-is-arms-control/

[29] Rebecca Lissner, "*The Future of Strategic Arms Control*," Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder, no. 4 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021), 5. The Future of Strategic Arms Control

[30] Ibid

[31] Jessica West and Lauren Vyse, "Arms control in outer space: Status, timeline, and analysis," *Ploughshares*, 14 March 2022, https://ploughshares.ca/arms-control-in-outer-space-status-timeline-

- Facilitating information exchanges through prior notification of relevant activities, verification mechanisms, and arrangements for crisis management to address misperceptions through transparency and communication.[32]
- Promoting shared understanding of strategic stability by managing mutual perceptions and escalation thresholds.

The above list of objectives suggests that arms control is a flexible policy approach that offers practical means for adversaries to adopt and pursue limited and specific objectives. Arms control contributes to stabilizing the security environment in more ways than just providing mechanisms for numerical reductions in armaments. Rather, it plays a crucial role in preserving strategic stability by encouraging restraint through communication and predictability. Instead of serving as an end, arms control fulfills a broader purpose by dealing with inter-state cooperation on issues related to limitation and reduction of weapons, as well as their political and military use during peace and war by influencing states' doctrines and military postures.

Assessing Potential Models for Future Arms Control Architecture

The rapid transition to a predominantly multipolar world order raises crucial questions regarding the institutional model of future arms control measures. As the Cold War's bilateral model of arms control does not suit the requirements of the evolving environment, any attempt to restore the old bilateral arms control arrangements may remain futile. In a structurally multipolar order characterized by political and technological diffusion,[33] any pursuit of arms control requires adaptation and flexibility in its institutional form while retaining the central objective, which is to manage strategic competition between antagonistic powers and minimize the risks as well as consequences of escalation. While this core objective remains the same, the means for achieving these objectives require adaptation. Instead

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and-analysis/, and Alexey Arbatov, 'Arms control in outer space: The Russian angle, and a possible way forward,' *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol 75, No. 4 (2019): 151-161

[32] Williams, H. (2019). "Asymmetric arms control and strategic stability: Scenarios for limiting hypersonic glide vehicles". *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *42*(6), 789–813. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1627521

[33] Talmadge, Caitlin. "Chapter 1 Multipolar Deterrence in the Emerging Nuclear Era" In *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age* edited by Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan, 13-38. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501767036-002

of relying on legally binding bilateral treaties, there have been differing proposals to explore possible arms control measures through trilateral or plurilateral arrangements, region-specific approaches that may include bilateral agreements or more flexible confidence-building measures (CBMs), and issue-specific regulatory frameworks to cater to a heterogeneous strategic landscape.

Trilateral Arms Control Agreements

China's economic and military rise since the advent of the twenty-first century has been the most defining aspect behind global power shifts. While China's growing military capabilities significantly influence the threat perceptions in Washington, D.C.,[34] Russia remains the only peer of the US, at least in numerical terms, in the realm of strategic nuclear weapons.[35] In 2020, President Trump announced the intention of 'proposing a bold new trilateral arms control initiative with Russia and China to help avoid an expensive arms race and instead work together to build a better, safer, and more prosperous future for all.'[36] While the international security environment adjusts to the end of unchallenged US primacy, it confronts the asymmetric risks of war and costs of competition between the US, China, and Russia due to profound differences between their nuclear strategies and postures. During the Cold War, the nuclear arms race was the central feature of the bipolar rivalry between the Soviet Union and the US. Contrary to this aspect, China does not accord similar significance to nuclear weapons in its overall military posture.[37] In the successive Defence White Papers issued by the Chinese government, the role of nuclear weapons has been identified as ensuring self-defense by deterring other states' use of threat to use nuclear weapons against China.[38] It also maintains a decades-old unconditional

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[34] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, November 2025), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf

[35] Rebecca Lissner, "*The Future of Strategic Arms Control"*, Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder, no. 4 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, April 2021), 2, https://assets.cfr.org/images/lissner-dp_final/lissner-dp_final.pdf

[36] Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, "Trump Still Wants Multilateral Arms Control," *Arms Control Association*, April 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-04/news/trump-still-wants-multilateral-arms-control

[37] Niu, Q. (2025). "Nuclear Weapons and China's National Security: Consistency, Evolvement and Risk Management". *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, *8*(1), 76–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2488183

[38] Ibid

policy of the 'no first use' (NFU) of nuclear weapons, besides strongly opposing 'nuclear sharing, extended deterrence, and other arrangements that undermine the international nuclear nonproliferation regime'.[39]

While there have been varying estimates regarding the number of nuclear warheads possessed by China, one study concludes that Beijing currently possesses approximately 600 nuclear warheads.[40] While China makes steady progress in developing sea-based assured second-strike capability, most of the Chinese nuclear arsenal remains land-based, with an estimated arsenal of approximately 376 warheads,[41] representing approximately five percent of the US and Russia's respective arsenals. The US estimates for the next five years project that Beijing's nuclear arsenal will exceed 1,000 warheads by 2030.[42] While China's nuclear program remains far from achieving parity with the US, the latter remains skeptical of the former's nuclear modernization efforts that could alter the nuclear balance between the two states, hence requiring it to retain the quantitative and qualitative overmatch. Besides nuclear warheads and delivery systems, the US remains wary of China's covert development of asymmetric cyber and counterspace capabilities and equates it with Beijing's geopolitical ambitions based on hostile intentions.[43] Given China's credible declaratory NFU policy and smaller arsenal, there is less incentive for Beijing to consider attempting a first strike against the US. Similarly, considering the US conventional military capabilities, there remains a lesser likelihood of nuclear exchange between the two states. However, in the wake of growing tensions between them over Taiwan, the risks of deliberate escalation have considerably

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[39] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era* (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, November 2025), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/wjzc/202511/t20251127_11761656

[40] Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, "Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2025," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 81, no. 2 (2025): 135–160, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2467011

[41] Ibid: 136

[42] US Department of Defense, *Report to Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, December 23, 2025), https://media.defense.gov/2025/Dec/23/2003849070/-1/-1/1/ANNUAL-REPORT-TO-CONGRESS-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2025.PDF

[43] Vince Manzo, "*Nuclear Arms Control Without a Treaty? Risks and Options After New START"* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, March 2019), http://cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IRM-2019-U-019494.pdf

increased. Simultaneously, Beijing has recently become more skeptical of US nuclear posture and possible nuclear use with respect to the growing tendency to deploy more nuclear weapons in the Asia-Pacific in the wake of nuclear sharing commitments with Asian allies and lowering nuclear thresholds as manifested through doctrinal positions.[44]

The US perceptions of China's nuclear program largely shape Washington's overall policy choices towards arms control. Despite China's declaratory commitments for restraint, the US believes that Beijing's nuclear modernization signals an offensive posture with minimum restraint.[45] Western analysts also point out that by 2030, China's nuclear arsenal will witness almost a fivefold increase, providing a force structure and posture like what the US and Russia possess.[46] From this perspective, continued adherence to arms control commitments undertaken through bilateral agreements between the US and Russia would expose both states to dangers posed by Beijing's unconstrained efforts of military modernization.[47] This perspective emphasizes that, in addition to other AI-enabled weapons and long-range precision strike capabilities, China's expanding nuclear arsenal makes prior arms control agreements irrelevant.[48] While Russia could be less wary of these changes in the trilateral strategic balance, the US is more skeptical of China's advancing nuclear capabilities as the two states compete for strategic and political influence at both regional and global levels. With respect to Russia, Washington believes that Moscow violated the INF Treaty by deploying intermediate-range missiles, retains a sizeable arsenal of nonstrategic nuclear weapons along with development of

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[44] Qiyang Niu, "Nuclear Weapons and China's National Security: Consistency, Evolvement and Risk Management," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 8, no. 1 (2025): 76–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2488183

[45] Henrik Stålhane Hiim, M. Taylor Fravel, and Magnus Langset Trøan, "The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma: China's Changing Nuclear Posture," *International Security* 47, no. 4 (Spring 2023): 147–187, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00457

[46] Austin Long, "Myths or Moving Targets? Continuity and Change in China's Nuclear Forces," *War on the Rocks*, December 4, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/myths-or-movingtargets-continuity-and-change-in-chinas-nuclear-forces/

[47] Dmitri Trenin, "Stability amid Strategic Deregulation: Managing the End of Nuclear Arms Control," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2020): 161–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813401

[48] Christine M. Leah and Frank A. Rose, "The Rocky Future of Arms Control," *Comparative Strategy* 45, no. 3 (2026): 387–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2025.2590459

hypersonic glide vehicles and cruise missiles, and uses 'escalate to deescalate' strategy to influence its and NATO's strategic behavior.[49]

While the US perspective emphasizes including China in possible future arms control arrangements, the two states do not have a substantive dialogue process to discuss these issues, which serves as the main factor behind the nuclear risks between the two sides. From China's vantage point, two key challenges undermine its motivation and seriousness to engage in risk-reduction and arms control dialogues. First, there is a dispute over finalizing the framework of discussions on risk-reduction, whereby Beijing prefers discussions on risk prevention while Washington, D.C. prefers discussions on risk management.[50] Secondly, the huge numerical disparity between China's nuclear arsenal and the number of warheads held by the US and Russia discourages Beijing from entering into any trilateral arms control framework. Chinese officials maintain that the huge disparity in arsenals does not provide for a 'fair and equitable basis' to join arms control negotiations.[51] Fu Cong, Director General of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Department of Arms Control, argued in an interview that 'If the US commits itself to reducing its nuclear arsenal to a level comparable to the Chinese nuclear arsenal, we'll be happy to join. But frankly speaking, that is something that we do not foresee happening in the near future, maybe not in my lifetime.'[52]

This perspective emphasizes that the strong power in an adversarial nuclear relationship needs to ensure that the vulnerability of the weaker state shall not be exploited to the advantage of the strong power.[53] While it remains to

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[49] Rebecca Lissner, *The Future of Strategic Arms Control*, Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder, no. 4 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, April 2021), 2, https://assets.cfr.org/images/lissner-dp_final/lissner-dp_final.pdf

[50] Qiyang Niu, "Nuclear Weapons and China's National Security: Consistency, Evolvement and Risk Management," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 8, no. 1 (2025): 76–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2488183

[51] Fu Cong, "Director-General Fu Cong's Interview with *Kommersant*," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, October 16, 2020, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/jks_665232/jkxw_665234/202406/t20240606_11405097.html

[52] Ibid

[53] Michael Albertson, ed., *Aligning Arms Control with the New Security Environment* (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2024), https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/2024-0528-cgsr-cccasional-paper-aligning-arms-control.pdf

be seen whether China will be willing to discuss any trilateral arms control proposals, the triangular asymmetries and differing threat perceptions indicate that it is almost impossible to achieve a legally binding symmetrical arms control agreement between the US, Russia, and China. This is particularly difficult in the absence of a mutually recognized foundation that could act as an equivalent to the principle of mutually assured destruction.

Bilateral Arms Control Measures

As pursuing trilateral arms control arrangements becomes increasingly difficult due to the rise in the number of essentially required parties to arms control in the multipolar world, states could opt for trade-offs and explore verifiable, technically specified, and reciprocal bilateral arms control agreements. While no arms control agreement is in sight to take the place of New START and no two nuclear-armed adversaries are in a serious negotiation process to pursue arms control, the international security environment is undergoing an unprecedented time in decades, with no formal restrictions on nuclear weapons. This fact alone should provide a strong incentive to nuclear-weapon states, particularly the major powers, to enter separate bilateral negotiations and explore meaningful bilateral pathways of restraint. Despite increasing complexities of the multipolar system, a bilateral approach to pursue arms control remains the most practical pathway. This approach offers a plausible way forward to deal with the complexities of a multipolar order, while recognizing each other's sensitivities.

For the US and Russia, the two sides have a long history of cooperation and implementation of arms control agreements. In the absence of a formal agreement, the two sides should prioritize risk reduction and cooperation over an unbridled arms race. The absence of transparency about each other's strategic postures and possible deployment of hundreds of nuclear weapons could lead to risky arms buildup with serious ramifications for a stable relationship. This requires minimizing the prevalent uncertainty between Washington and Moscow and preserving the channels of communication. However, this approach also confronts certain challenges. First, unlike the Cold War environment, Russia's conception of strategic stability has evolved from seeing it as a condition in which neither side feels incentivized to launch a first strike to a broader concept that goes beyond just preserving nuclear balance to deter coercion and ensure survival across different

domains.[54] This view has a direct bearing on Russia's contemporary approach towards arms control, where it sees less value in compartmentalizing the nuclear issue and prefers combining arms control with other geopolitical issues like NATO's expansion.[55] Second, Russia's recent changes in the updated nuclear doctrine that increase reliance on nuclear weapons, as it counts on maintaining a large arsenal of warheads and missiles to deter NATO's conventional superiority,[56] make it less likely to accept limitations on the nuclear program. Third, the US force modernization efforts, like the Trump administration's announcement to shield the continent by developing the US 'Golden Dome' missile defense system, directly exacerbate Moscow's threat perception regarding the credibility of its deterrent capability.

The more practical bilateral approach for arms control between the US and Russia could focus beyond the traditional scope of deployment of strategic weapons to discuss new categories of weapons. After the expiration of New START, the two sides need to engage in follow-on discussions to explore the prospects of bilateral risk-reduction measures, instead of restricting to principles of parity and reciprocity.[57] Considering that there are currently no legal constraints against the deployment of strategic forces, the agenda for future US and Russia negotiations may focus on discussing the adverse impacts of the integration of emerging technologies, advanced delivery systems, and the deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Like mutually assured destruction served as the foundational basis to institutionalize bilateral arms control arrangements during the Cold War, mutual risk management could serve as an alternative framework in light of new challenges posed by the complex multipolar order and integration of disruptive technologies in military systems. Moscow and Washington, D.C., should recognize that in an integrated battle space, neither side can control

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[54] Nicolò Fasola and Derek Averre, "Current Russian Perspectives on Strategic Stability and Deterrence through the Prism of Strategic Culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2026): 1–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2025.2602557

[55] Linda van der Horst and Qiyang Niu, "Navigating Multipolarity: Reimagining Process Design for Future Strategic Stability Frameworks," *St Antony's International Review* 20, no. 2 (2025): 61

[56] Malaika Afridi, "Understanding Russia's Nuclear Doctrinal Shifts," *Issue Brief* (Islamabad: Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, November 28, 2024), 1, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/IB_Malaika_Nov_28_2024.pdf

[57] Stacy Achoki et al., *The Next Generation's Arms Control Agenda for 2050* (London: British American Security Information Council (BASIC), September 2021), 30, https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Arms-Control-Final.pdf

escalation. By appreciating the mutual threats, the underlying incentive for both states is to lower the risks of miscalculation, reduce uncertainty, and address misperceptions. This requires concrete efforts to challenge previous notions of strategic stability and develop a shared understanding, considering the blurring distinction between conventional and nuclear realms.[58] However, little may be expected from the negotiations in which one side enjoys a considerable advantage over the other.[59]

In the case of China and the US, while it seems impractical to have a trilateral arms control arrangement that could bind China, the US, and Russia under a single framework to limit their respective strategic capabilities, Beijing and Washington may bolster bilateral efforts to pursue arms control. This requires prioritizing high-level strategic stability dialogues between the two sides to cover a wide range of strategic issues, including nuclear doctrines, force postures to include nuclear weapons, as well as integration of emerging technologies, and risk-reduction measures. Since the two states are likely to remain entangled in great power competition for a considerable time in the foreseeable future, and they have never engaged in institutionalized arms control efforts, there is a need to ensure transparency with respect to motives and intentions by exchanging information and sharing perceptions about stability and escalation pathways. Although the adversarial nuclear relationship between the two states is not defined by parity or numerical symmetry, growing perceptions of the US regarding China as an emerging nuclear peer to the US by 2030 or 2035,[60] and concerns about its nuclear modernization efforts, should incentivize acknowledging mutual vulnerabilities.

Considering the complex nature of challenges posed by multipolarity, asymmetric forces possessed by competing great powers, and rapid integration of emerging technologies in military systems, any attempts to explore arms control measures that focus exclusively on nuclear issues

[58] Ibid

[59] John D. Maurer, "Arms Control among Rivals," in *Space and Missile Wars: What Awaits*, ed. Henry D. Sokolski (Arlington, VA: Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, 2021), 241

[60] Qiyang Niu, "Nuclear Weapons and China's National Security: Consistency, Evolvement and Risk Management," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 8, no. 1 (2025): 76–90, https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2488183

could prove less productive.[61] As technology continues to evolve at an unprecedented pace, future arms control efforts need to entail a broader agenda to discuss wider issues and may prioritize risk reduction over arsenal reduction. As discussed previously, China and the US retain differing stances on defining the framework for any possible risk reduction measures. Their respective insistence on crisis prevention and crisis management may be dovetailed in a manner to identify broader issues of mutual interest. Qiyang Niu suggests that the possible agenda for their bilateral negotiations could focus on the following measures, as also discussed during Track 2 interactions held in Beijing:[62]

- Elaborating policies and doctrines to address misperceptions.
- Restrictions on certain weapons and geographical deployments, like the deployment of INF-range ground-based delivery systems of both sides in the Asia-Pacific.
- Pre-launch notification measures to promote transparency and avoid misperceptions. It is worth mentioning that China shared advanced information with the US prior to the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile in September 2024 to avoid miscalculations.[63]
- Pre-notification of US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) as a measure to strengthen maritime crisis management between China and the US.
- Reciprocal establishment of National Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres (NNRRC) in the US and China to prevent crisis and facilitate communication, on the lines of centers established between the US and Russia.

The precedence of having non-binding agreements between the two states offers an optimistic outlook to explore more meaningful bilateral arms control measures to address strategic risks. Until the two states could pursue legally binding agreements, they could agree on exploring the modular arrangements, as enumerated above, that could serve as building blocks for

[61] Rebecca Lissner, *The Future of Strategic Arms Control*, Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder, no. 4 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, April 2021), 2, https://assets.cfr.org/images/lissner-dp_final/lissner-dp_final.pdf

[62] Ibid

[63] Nectar Gan, "China Fires ICBM into Pacific Ocean in First Such Public Test in Decades as Regional Tensions Flare," *CNN*, September 26, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/25/asia/china-icbm-test-pacific-ocean-intl-hnk

more comprehensive frameworks. In 2014, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) system, both states adopted the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUEA).[64] Later at the US-China Summit held in Beijing during the same year, the two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on pre-notification of major military activities.

Unilateral Commitments

The expiry of New START does not mean the end of significance and urgency to pursue arms control for a stable international security environment in the multipolar world. One of the most significant aspects of arms control is the flexibility in its approaches, whereby states do not need to rely solely on bilateral or multilateral bindings; they could opt for unilateral actions to promote broader arms control objectives.[65] The prospects of reciprocity remain the lowest in unilateral approaches, yet the exemption from the need to have verification measures incentivises states to adopt voluntary measures to offer greater transparency regarding their intentions. The unilateral arms control measures may be organized into four distinct categories: political declarations, domain-specific moratoriums, voluntary transparency measures, and doctrinal self-restraint. Each of these approaches contributes towards uniquely preserving strategic stability, reflecting the state's intent to exercise restraint even in the absence of reciprocal commitments from the adversary.

Since political declarations are meant to signal the willingness to reduce the dangers of escalation, these signify the most basic form of unilateral arms control measures. The famous 'Reagan-Gorbachev Principle,' which emphasized that since nuclear war cannot be won, it must not be fought, remains the most famous example of a non-binding political declaration. Its continued relevance was reflected through the joint reiteration of this principle by all NPT signatory nuclear-weapon states in January 2022.[66] The second category of unilateral arms control measures relates to domain-

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[64] Youngmin Seo, *The South China Dispute as International Law and Politics: Discovering the Role of Law in Times of Power Shift* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2024), 201

[65] Robin Brown, *Arms Control: Has the West Lost Its Way?* (London: Alliance Publishers Ltd. for the Institute for European Defence & Strategic Studies, 1987), 34

[66] Tobias Fella, Noah Mayhew, and Daria Selezneva, *Future Formats of Nuclear Arms Control*, Deep Cuts Commission Issue Brief 19 (Hamburg: Deep Cuts Commission, December 16, 2025), https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17828341

specific moratoriums that aim to promote restraint in those areas of evolving strategic competition where formal legal frameworks have not yet been negotiated or agreed upon. In April 2022, the US declared a unilateral commitment not to conduct direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) missile tests is an example of this approach that was seen as a positive step to enhance space sustainability to reduce the threats posed by such tests to military and civilian space assets by generating orbital debris.[67] This example indicates how domain-specific unilateral measures can help building norms in areas where technological developments outpace the adoption of formal and mutually agreed measures of restraint.

Adopting voluntary transparency measures to reduce risks of inadvertent escalation, strategic uncertainties, and dangers of miscalculation constitutes the third category of unilateral arms control measures. Beijing's pre-launch notification of an intercontinental ballistic missile test in September 2024 exemplifies an important confidence-building measure. Such actions do not require compromising the state's legitimate security requirements by expecting formal, legally binding commitments or intrusive verification procedures. Conversely, these are meant to minimize the risks of misinterpreting routine military activities as acts of aggression. In a multipolar strategic environment with heightened dangers of inadvertent escalation due to dual-capable delivery systems and advanced conventional capabilities, these measures can help develop mutual trust among adversaries about each other's strategic intentions by minimizing uncertainties. This not only paves the way for more formal arms control arrangements but also helps preserve crisis stability.

The fourth category in unilateral arms control measures includes deliberate declarations of policies to demonstrate doctrinal self-restraint as an attempt to constrain escalation pathways. As discussed in previous sections, China's decades-old adherence to the doctrinal stance of NFU and Negative Security Assurances (NSA) signifies this form of unilateral commitment.[68] By limiting the circumstances that warrant the use of nuclear weapons and pledging not to threaten the nuclear-armed states, thus encouraging them not to consider the option of acquiring nuclear weapons, a state declares the

[67] Bruce McClintock, "US Decision on ASAT Testing a Positive Step Towards Space Sustainability," *RAND*, April 21, 2022, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2022/04/united-states-decision-on-asat-testing-a-positive-step.html

[68] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Security Assurances," July 23, 2024, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/wjbxw/202407/t20240723_11458631.html

strategic intent not to exercise restraint. Although such commitments are subject to questions of credibility during times of crises, they directly contribute to predictability and transparency regarding nuclear posture.

In an era of strategic uncertainties and reduced prospects for formal arms control arrangements, the unilateral actions provide the basis for more concrete agreements and frameworks. Besides reflecting a restrained posture, these measures also carry the normative significance for the particular state adopting these steps to project itself as a responsible military power among competing states. While Russia and the US are currently not constrained by any treaty like a legally binding arrangement, they could engage in meaningful strategic dialogue and make parallel political commitments to uphold the numerical limits set out in the New START.[69] In the absence of legal force, such commitments could reduce the tendency for nuclear expansion and offer more predictability with respect to each other's nuclear postures. Historically, the two states have engaged in such political declarations as Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (1991-1992), whereby Russia committed to removing non-strategic nuclear weapons from submarines and surface ships, whereas the US withdrew overseas ground-launched short-range weapons. The two states have agreed on the necessity to address threats posed by advanced and sophisticated weapons that carry the risks of accidental war by shortening the response times.[70] Another area of action relates to addressing the problem of strategic entanglement that accentuates the dilemma of perception as well as response. By recognizing how non-nuclear strategic weapons threaten the survivability of each other's nuclear deterrent capabilities, the two sides may consider offering more transparency with respect to dual-capable missile systems.[71] In an era marred by threats of rapid escalation, any misreading of incoming adversarial weapon systems could lead to nuclear exchange with catastrophic consequences.

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[69] Stephen Cimbala, "Beyond New START: Prospects for US-Russian Nuclear Arms Control," *Global Security Review*, April 14, 2026, https://globalsecurityreview.com/beyond-new-start-prospects-for-u-s-russian-nuclear-arms-control/

[70] Tobias Fella, Noah Mayhew, and Daria Selezneva, *Future Formats of Nuclear Arms Control*, Deep Cuts Commission Issue Brief 19 (Berlin: Deep Cuts Commission, December 16, 2025), 6, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17828341

[71] Paul van Hooft, Lotje Boswinkel, and Tim Sweijs, *Shifting Sands of Strategic Stability: Towards a New Arms Control Agenda* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022), 90, https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Arms-Control-Shifting-sands-of-strategic-stability-2022-HCSS.pdf

Similarly, in the case of China, President Xi Jinping's government could offer greater transparency regarding its strategic thinking, perceptions, and military posture without compromising security. China's principle-driven doctrinal commitments, including the NFU policy, commitment not to share nuclear capability in terms of extended nuclear deterrence, and NSA by committing not to attack non-nuclear weapons states with nuclear weapons, are widely acknowledged.[72] The continued adherence to these political commitments is required more than ever before, considering the prevailing arms control environment and growing strategic complexities in the multipolar world. While there are challenges to win reciprocity, unilateral measures of arms control remain the easiest way to pursue restraint, as the state adopting unilateral measures could exercise maximum authority to adhere to such commitments. Although this approach carries inherent shortcomings of a lack of reciprocity, a legally binding nature, and an absence of verification mechanisms, the unilateral actions provide a basis for more concrete agreements and a framework.

Conclusion

The international security environment in the contemporary multipolar world confronts the challenge of eroding arms control architecture. The expiration of New START raises serious concerns regarding the unconstrained arms buildup and intensifying strategic competition in the absence of any guardrails to ensure transparency, as well as risk reduction measures. As compared to past years, the multipolar world is characterised by a rise in the number of competing actors, asymmetries in respective nuclear capabilities, integration of rapidly advancing disruptive technologies in military systems, and blurring distinctions between nuclear and conventional military capabilities. This paper concludes that while the underlying logic of arms control remains the same, which is to regulate and limit the development as well as use of force, introducing risk reduction measures to address the destructive consequences of war, and building confidence between antagonistic powers, the new trends require redefining the objectives of arms control to address unprecedented challenges and threat perceptions of competing powers.

[72] Xia Liping, "Impacts of China's Nuclear Doctrine on International Nuclear Disarmament," *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, September 2021, https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Xia_Liping.pdf

Exploring Potential Models and Trajectories

While the core logic of arms control remains the same, the paper has discussed at length how the potential mechanisms to pursue restraint and risk reduction measures may follow different structures. The most significant distinction between the bipolar and multipolar nuclear order is the rise of China's military power and the US perception of it as a potential nuclear peer. However, China's considerably leaner nuclear arsenal, asymmetrical capabilities, and advancements in disruptive technologies constrain the possibilities of incorporating Beijing in bilateral nuclear arrangements between Russia and the US. The paper identifies the differing perceptions of great powers towards each other's respective nuclear postures and the absence of a common understanding of strategic stability as primary reasons behind enduring strategic competition and arms race. In keeping with the distinct requirements of a multipolar strategic environment, the paper examines the prospects of trilateral, bilateral, and unilateral models of arms control arrangements. By analyzing the strengths and shortcomings of each of these approaches, the paper concludes that in wake of reduced prospects for formal arms control arrangements, the unilateral actions provide the basis for more concrete agreements and framework that could shape the future arms control architecture. It further emphasizes that while the comprehensive legally binding measures, involving all competing great powers under a single framework, seem impractical in the foreseeable future, states must pursue bilateral as well as unilateral arrangements, including the non-binding political declarations, to enhance transparency and reduce the risks of inadvertent escalation. The future of arms control architecture is less likely to be shaped by a single institutional model; it hinges upon layered and modular arrangements.

BOOK REVIEWS

MARKA-E-HAQ
Deterrence, Provocation and Strategic Maturity in South Asia by Zafar Khan (Paramount Book Pakistan, 2026) 203

Bilal Zubair*

The book '*Marka-e-Haq: Deterrence, Provocation and Strategic Maturity in South Asia'* is a profound scholarly contribution to understanding the South Asian Strategic landscape. Written against the backdrop of the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, Marak-e-Haq (the Battle of Truth), the book narrates the conflicting objectives in the way South Asian nuclear rivals Pakistan and India view the logic of war and peace in the region. Divided into ten chapters, the book offers a rare opportunity to the strategic community that includes both practitioners and academics from Pakistan to present Pakistan's view on the unfolding of Marak-e-Haq. The book is edited by Zafar Khan (PhD), who is Executive Director of the Balochistan Think Tank Network (BTTN) and a Professor of International Relations at the Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering, and Management Sciences (BUITEMS), Quetta. He has published extensively in leading international journals and is the author of two books, i.e., *Pakistan*'s *Nuclear Policy: A Minimum Credible Deterrence* (2015) and *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: New Technologies and Challenges to Sustainable Peace* (2020).

The preface of this volume, written by General Zubair Mahmood Hayat, NI(M), HI(M), Retired Former Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, sets the tone for the chapters that follow. He encapsulates the South Asian strategic environment as an interplay between Indian Strategic drift and Pakistan's deterrence posture, as embedded in the doctrine of Full Spectrum Deterrence. In this context, Marka-e-Haq in May 2025 reinforced the notion that any Indian attempt to undermine strategic stability through the imposition of 'New Normal' in the region shall be answered with a proportional and measured response from Pakistan to preserve deterrence stability.

In the first chapter, 'India's Strategic Drift and South Asia Security Dilemma,' former Ambassador Zamir Akram (Retired) argues that India's

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'New Normal' policy towards Pakistan has historical roots dating back to the independence of Pakistan. Historically, the Indian approach toward Pakistan has been one of pursuing regional hegemony. These ambitions have fuelled a security dilemma in the region, further exacerbated by the rise of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh **(**RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While New Delhi continues to view itself as an emerging great power, the author argues that its pursuit of strategic autonomy, the saffronization of state and society, and its increasingly reckless behavior toward Pakistan have raised international concerns. He further observes that the global ambitions of India have suffered a serious setback in the wake of the May 2025 crisis, motivating the United States (US) to question India's delusional approach toward Pakistan.

The second chapter, 'India's Terror Industry: Threat to International Peace and Security,' is authored by Professor Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal and traces the intensifying belligerency in India's posture towards Pakistan to the Doval Doctrine of 2014, introducing it as Prime Minister Modi's broader political strategy, which resonates with the RSS's ideological vision of India rooted in Kauṭilyan statecraft. He argues that Modi's India combines the oppressions against minorities, especially Indian Muslims and Kashmiris, hostile relations with Pakistan, a strategic nexus with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and the use of non-state actors to carry out extrajudicial killings of dissidents globally. According to the author, this Indian terror industry has drawn criticism in world capitals, including Washington and Toronto, and the international community has a responsibility to hold India accountable for its irresponsible behavior that poses a serious threat to peace and stability in the region.

In the third chapter, 'Kashmir and Water Resources: Nuclear Flashpoints in South Asia', Dr. Rizwana Abbasi identifies the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJ&K) and contestation over water resources as the two fault lines that make South Asia extremely prone to nuclear Armageddon. She highlights that India has undermined the Kashmiri freedom movement through a false narrative of terrorism, while challenging United Nations (UN)-led resolutions, the identity of the Kashmiri people, and the legal status of the Kashmir dispute. By scrapping the autonomous status of the IIOJ&K, India has only intensified the uprising, and revocation of its constitutional Articles 370 and 35-A will not alter the legal realities and will not serve to heal the arduous past and achieve peace. Meanwhile, by abandoning the IWT, India has aggravated mistrust and war-fighting trends with Pakistan, thereby narrowing the space for future confidence-

building measures (CBMs) and dialogue between the two states. Together, these moves destabilize regional deterrence, threaten strategic stability, and make lasting peace unlikely without resolving Kashmir and restoring the IWT.

In the fourth chapter, 'Strategic Culture of Bharat and Offensive Doctrines: Pakistan's Response: Cohesive Deterrence,' Lieutenant General Mazhar Jamil (Retired) identifies strategic culture as the primary driver of Indian bellicosity in the region. The chapter inquires into the epistemological roots of the word 'Bharat,' a mythological construct that has permeated India's strategic thinking, war doctrines, and state behavior. The author has referred to the Indian thinkers such as Savarkar, Mookerji, and J. Sai Deepak, who were the leading proponents of Bharat as a civilizational construct and Hindu nationalism based on a hegemonic identity. The author further argues that these ideational roots of the Indian constitution, polity, and society have led to an abnormal state pursuing offensive doctrines aimed at regional domination. The only obstacle to Indian grand designs is Pakistan's logic of cohesive deterrence and a strong will to respond, as demonstrated during Bunyanum Marsoos in May 2025.

The fifth chapter, 'Marka-e-Haq and the New Discipline of Deterrence,' by Brigadier Dr. Zahir Kazmi (Retired), provides one of the book's central arguments. It moves the discussion beyond battlefield narration and reads Operation Bunyanum Marsoos as a case of disciplined deterrence in response to provocation. The author argues that Pakistan's success lay not merely in responding to Indian coercion, but in doing so with proportion, timing, restraint, joint-force cohesion, and escalation control intact. Whereas India, through its 'New Normal' posture, sought to normalise compellence under the nuclear shadow, Pakistan demonstrated that the space for limited war remains, in practice, unusable.

The sixth chapter, 'The Perils of Self-Deception in Nuclear South Asia,' by Dr. Rabia Akhtar, questions India's assumptions regarding nuclear signalling and cautions against the dangers of strategic overconfidence, misperception, and the illusion of controllable escalation in a nuclearized region where miscalculation can carry grave consequences. The May 2025 crisis, she argues, reinforced an uncomfortable reality, i.e., escalation in South Asia is rarely linear, predictable, or fully controllable. Through charting a historical account of how Indian military doctrines, galvanized in self-deception, have drawn the region into a spiral of conflict, the author warns of the perils associated with such behaviour by India.

In the seventh chapter, 'Escalation ladder and Future Crisis Blueprint', Brigadier Dr. Naeem Salik (Retired) introduces a theoretical debate on the escalation dynamics. The author encapsulated the South Asian crisis through the lens of Herman Kahn's 'escalation ladder' and Rebecca Hersman's 'Wormhole Model', suggesting that the dynamics of escalation review are owing to rapid changes in the traditional variables impacting crisis behaviour. He argues that South Asia carries a unique security dynamic distinct from its own and must not be equated with the security dilemma in other regions. He warns that while India will continue to challenge Pakistan's deterrent capability, Pakistan must correspondingly continue to review and update its deterrent posture aimed at maintaining strategic stability in the region.

The eighth chapter, 'Re-assessing Deterrence Stability in South Asia: Lessons from the May 2025 Conflict,' by Lieutenant General Khalid Ahmed Kidwai (Retired), argues that the 87-hour conflict of May 2025 validated Pakistan's Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQ+) strategy as an effective framework for conventional retaliation. He further contends that this framework should evolve into a 'QPQ++' strategy to address emerging security challenges. The chapter also characterizes Prime Minister Modi's 'new normal' policy as a strategic miscalculation that failed to achieve its intended objectives. In contrast, the author maintains that Pakistan's nuclear deterrent is a credible constraint rather than a bluff, one that effectively limits India's freedom to undertake kinetic military actions.

The ninth chapter, 'Lessons from Marka-e-Haq in view of Indian Strategic Culture', by Lieutenant General Sarfaraz Sattar (Retired), argues that India aspires to be a regional hegemon since the partition of the subcontinent, an orientation derived from Indian strategic culture embedded in Vedic traditions that continues to influence Indian political choices and military doctrines. As a result, the South Asian region faces recurrent crisis instability. The author does not see India dissuading from its crisis escalation behavior; therefore, Pakistan must prepare to meet it with matching resolve and response vis-à-vis India.

The Chapter ten, 'Strategic Stability in South Asia-A Difficult Journey Ahead', authored by Lieutenant General Aamer Riaz (Retired), argues that strategic stability remains an illusion in South Asia and can only be sustained by perilous restraint. Among many other factors, the author termed Western, especially the US, continuous support to India's ambitions for regional hegemony as the largest contributor to regional instability and a threat to deterrence stability.

To conclude, this book is an important and timely contribution to the growing scholarship on South Asian security and deterrence. One of the book's greatest strengths is the breadth of expertise it brings together, combining the insights of senior military leaders, diplomats, and scholars, including three former Directors General of the Strategic Plans Division. Rather than simply recounting the events of the May 2025 crisis, the contributors use the episode to examine broader questions of deterrence, escalation, and crisis management in a nuclearized region.

A recurring thread across the chapters is the argument that Pakistan's calibrated, proportionate, and politically controlled response prevented India from establishing a 'new normal' of limited coercion under the nuclear shadow. Whether or not readers agree with every conclusion, the volume succeeds in stimulating serious debate and encouraging a deeper understanding of the strategic dynamics that continue to shape South Asia. Also, it reminds readers that in a nuclear environment, strategic success is ultimately defined not by the amount of destruction inflicted, but by the ability to restore deterrence, maintain escalation control, and prevent a bigger war.

The Troubling State of India's Democracy by Sumit Ganguly, Dinsha Mistree, and Larry Diamond (University of Michigan Press, 2024) 394

Maryam Raashed*

As democratic regression increasingly permeates political systems of countries across the world, most of the governments are resorting to majoritarian nationalism, populism, and the centralization of executive powers to consolidate their authority. The book '*The Troubling State of India's Democracy*' was jointly co-edited by Sumit Ganguly, Dinsha Mistree, and Larry Diamond, who are prominent political scientists and scholars. In this co- edited volume, they establish the notion that India is no exception to this epidemic of democratic backsliding. The book serves as a follow-up to *The State of India's Democracy* (2007); however, the latest edition offers a considerably bleaker assessment than the former edition. While the Indian democracy historically faced numerous challenges, none have proven as formidable as those it faces today.

The book argues that the quality of democratic governance in India has markedly deteriorated, particularly since the rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). While traditionally an urban, upper and middle-class party, the BJP has since evolved into an umbrella party (like the Indian National Congress), with the notable exception of its limited appeal among the Muslim minority. Consequently, it has emerged as a dominant force in national politics. According to the book, India's democratic system is now experiencing increasing institutional and political strain. Although considerably free and fair elections continue to be regularly conducted at the national, state, and even municipal levels, the broader democratic foundations of the country are steadily weakening.

As it is an edited volume, the book brings together a wide range of scholars who examine India's democratic backsliding across three interconnected levels, including politics, state, and society. The key developments contributing to this backsliding, as identified by the contributors, include the transformation of India's party system from the long-standing

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dominance of the Congress party system, to the ascendence and consolidation of the regional parties' system, to the ultimate rise of the BJP's electoral dominance. While the era of regional party dominance encouraged a wide range of political parties to engage with national elections, the dominance of a single party has weakened the competitiveness and organisational capacity of opposition parties.

At the state level, the book highlights the increasing politicization of state institutions. As power has become progressively focused within the central government, the autonomy and credibility of state institutions like the Central Bureau of Investigation, the National Investigation Agency, the Enforcement Directorate, and the Income Tax Department have steadily eroded. Likewise, the Indian judiciary and bureaucracy are experiencing growing political pressure. At the societal level, the book points to a noticeable contraction of civil liberties, with media freedoms and the functioning of civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations increasingly coming under pressure. The contributors further highlight a significant rise in religious polarization within Indian society, and an increased mobilisation around Hindu nationalist narratives and the broader ascendance of majoritarian politics. As a result, communal divisions have deepened, reshaping the social foundations of India's democracy.

In comparative politics scholarship, India's democracy, has received much academic focus as a relatively successful case in the global South. Likewise, the recession of democratic principles since the rise of Hindu nationalism has also been extensively examined. However, what distinguishes this book, is its ability to consolidate a vast data of empirical evidence on the subject, making it a valuable resource for future research. While the volume positions India as an electoral democracy, it doesn't, theoretically speaking, propose any ground-breaking or entirely new lens to view democratic decline of India. Nonetheless, it makes a significant contribution toward refining the existing framework of 'democratic backsliding' and applying it to the Indian context.

The theoretical clarity of the book spares readers from becoming entangled in the often complex and overlapping concepts that characterize this subject. On the other hand, this conceptual simplicity comes at a cost, the book ultimately stops short of arriving at a single, definitive verdict on India's democratic status. While some contributors argue that India can no longer

be recognized as liberal democracy, others employ frameworks such as 'illiberal democracy' or 'ethnic democracy,' while still others continue to describe it as an electoral democracy undergoing steep erosion.

Unlike many edited volumes, this book succeeds in maintaining a consistent methodological approach and coherent set of data sources across its chapters. or empirical grounding, the book draws predominantly on global democracy indices, such as those developed by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), Freedom House, and the Economist Intelligence Unit. It may be noted that this analytical reliance on western democracy indices, though widely used in comparative politics, may nonetheless invite scepticism from India's domestic audiences who may tend to question the normative and methodological assumptions, supporting such indices. At the same time, each chapter also draws a wide range of subject-specific empirical studies and data to substantiate its arguments. Moreover, the contributors incorporate qualitative evidence from field observations and policy analyses, which adds an additional layer of rigour to the subsequent analyses. Therefore, this methodological approach of complementing statistical trends with qualitative evidence strengthens the overall analytical framework of the book. This triangulation of numerical indicators with on-ground insights constitutes a distinctive feature of the volume, particularly given that much of the existing scholarship on the subject has relied predominantly on qualitative data alone.

Lastly, while the book primarily attributes the change in India's democratic trajectory to the internal lapses of the Indian National Congress and the consequent rise of BJP, it could have engaged more deeply with the underlying structural drivers of this transformation, like ideologically driven mobilization and the ascent of Hindu nationalism. Moreover, given the policy relevance of this subject, the practical utility of this book could have been further strengthened by the inclusion of a dedicated chapter exploring policy options or reforms to mitigate democratic backsliding in India. Nevertheless, the insights offered by the book remain valuable and can serve to shape policy debates and guide international engagements with India.

With democratic erosion now a widely recognized global phenomenon, future editions of this volume, if undertaken, will likely be anticipated with the hope that they turn more directly to the question of how democratic backsliding of India might be reversed.

The Coming Storm: Power, Conflict, and Warnings from History by Odd Arne Westad (Penguin Book, UK, 2026) 256

Nawal Nawaz*

The writer Odd Arne Westad is one of the most distinguished historians of international relations and global politics, and is widely recognized for his seminal scholarship on China and the history of great power competition. In his book*, 'The Coming Storm: Power, Conflict, and Warnings from History*,' Westad draws on extensive historical research to address one of the most persistent questions of the contemporary era, i.e., whether the world is moving toward a new era of great power competition. He argues that the emerging international order resonates a striking resemblance to the geopolitical environment that preceded World War I, warning that the failure of policy makers to draw on the lessons of history. It would also allow increasing competition among major powers to end once again in catastrophic consequences.

The central theme of the book suggests that the world is transitioning from a stable unipolar order, which is dominated by the United States (US), to a complex multipolar order characterised by strategic competition among major powers, including China, Russia and India. The author draws a compelling similarity between this transition and the transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the interplay of declining British hegemony, the rise of new powers, growing nationalism, alliance politics, and economic rivalries culminated in World War I. By tracing these historical patterns, the author restraints the international community against the perils of arms race, protectionism, geopolitical mistrust, and unresolved territorial disputes that risk replicating the conditions that once propelled the world toward catastrophic conflict.

The most impressive aspect of this book is the author's ability to use historical analogy to great effect. He traces the devastating impact of World War I and emphasizes how political leaders have been involved in some of the worst events in history. Moreover, he identifies several factors, including fear, miscalculation, nationalism, and strategic competition, as the underlying drivers of the conflict, and contends that these factors remain discernibly present in contemporary international politics. By exploring

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these historical patterns, he illuminates the deep structural rifts in contemporary global order, particularly between the US and China, convincing the readers to acknowledge that the conflicts of the present are firmly rooted in the unresolved dynamics of the past.

A substantial portion of the book focuses on examining the rise of China, presenting a good comparison to Germany in the decades before 1914. The author explains the remarkable evolution of China from an impoverished and isolated state to a global economic and military power, through a wide range of reforms, including industrial policies and economic reforms, as well as successful integration of the Chinese economy into the global order. He further argues that the growing pre-eminence of China has raised considerable unease among the US and other major powers, much as did the rise of Germany unsettled Russia, Britain, and France in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In this regard, Westad contends that the rise of China is driven by a combination of factors, including nationalism, ambition, insecurity, and historical memory, rather than describing Beijing as an inherently aggressive or revisionist power. Through this balanced and nuanced analysis, the author clarifies the motivations behind Beijing's actions while simultaneously recognizing the reciprocal concerns that these actions generate among its competitors and neighbouring states.

In addition to the rise of China, the author examines the changing role of the US in contemporary world politics. He argues that the US is in a relative power decline, despite its immense economic and military power, on the eve of WWI in Britain. He also argues that the view of decline influences foreign policy behaviour, fuels protectionist sentiments, and deepens strategic competition. The recent trajectory of US-China competition, recurring trade disputes, and the broader debate surrounding the future of the international liberal order collectively testify to the enduring relevance of his analysis. In addition to the US-China relationship, Westad explores the evolving roles of other major powers, including Russia and India, whose foreign policies are influenced by their unique historical experiences and aspirations for greater global influence. A multipolar order in which several states are engaged in interaction, cooperation, and competition at the same time, is the form in which the author deliberately offers an image of the international order, rather than a bipolar contest between China and the US.

The rise of nationalism and developing mistrust among the major powers have increasingly damaged public opinion and political discourse, eroding

the foundations of cooperative international engagement. This trust deficit among rival states undermines diplomatic efforts and increases the risks of escalation during periods of crisis. If contemporary flashpoints, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the China-India border dispute, are not managed through sustained diplomatic engagement and peaceful conflict resolution, they could significantly increase the likelihood of wider regional or even global confrontation.

In discussing the role of technology and military competition, Westad draws a parallel with the pre-1914 era, cautioning the international community against the destabilizing perils of unchecked technological advancement in the context of contemporary conflicts. He posits that rather than guaranteeing security, these advancements risk exacerbating existing tensions and further eroding the stability of the international order. By directing the attention of readers to the implications regarding artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, and emerging technologies, the author lends a compelling contemporary perspective to traditional debates on deterrence and strategic stability. In doing so, the author challenges the prevailing notion that states can guarantee peace solely by possessing nuclear weapons.

Nonetheless, the book is not without its limitations. The extent to which the author has depended on historical analogies could well lead to the impression that he is too deterministic, and critics might well argue that there were greater differences between the contemporary world and the pre-1914 era. The considerable reliance of the author on historical analogies risks appearing overly deterministic, and critics may reasonably object that stark differences exist. Moreover, factors like economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, and global communication networks substantially diminish the resemblance between the contemporary global order and that of the pre-1914 era. Furthermore, the establishment of institutions like the United Nations has also fundamentally transformed the contours of international politics, creating direct comparisons with the politics of the early twentieth century. The author has also overlooked the role and significance of non-state actors and middle powers in the present international order, emphasizing the great powers. Additionally, it is often overemphasizing great power dynamics at the expense of other significant actors, where the role of non-state actors, middle powers, regional organizations, and multinational corporations receives insufficient attention, and the risks posed by transnational challenges are largely ignored.

Despite these limitations, the author delivers a convincing and intellectually rigorous account of the contemporary debate regarding the future of great power competition, interrogating whether states can evolve toward peaceful coexistence or systemic rivalry will ultimately lead to war. The author has offered well-researched and balanced analysis of historical and contemporary international order, urging students, scholars, and policy makers to recognize the permanent importance of diplomacy and strategic restraint by reflecting on the lessons of history, making this book an essential read for all those concerned with the subject of geopolitics and the future of the international order.

List of Acronyms

ABM Treaty	Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASAT	Anti-Satellite Weapons
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BMD	Ballistic Missile Defense
CBMs	Confidence-Building Measures
CD	Conference on Disarmament
CMD	Credible Minimum Deterrence
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty
CTR	Cooperative Threat Reduction
CUEA	Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea
DGMOs	Director General of Military Operations
DRS	Doctrine of Rapid and Short Wars
EDTs	Emerging and Disruptive Technologies
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
FMCT	Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty
FSD	Full Spectrum Deterrence
GNO	Global Nuclear Order
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency

List of Acronyms

IBGs	Integrated Battle Groups
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
IIOJ&K	Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir
INF Treaty	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LoC	Line of Control
MAD	Mutual Assured Destruction
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NC3	Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications
NFU	No First Use
New START	New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
NNRRC	National Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSA	Negative Security Assurances
NSG	Nuclear Suppliers Group
NWS	Nuclear-Weapon States
PNE	Peaceful Nuclear Explosion
PTBT	Partial Test Ban Treaty
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

List of Acronyms

SORT	Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty
START Treaty	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
SRR	Strategic Restraint Regime
SSBNs	Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarines
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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