

NUCLEAR ORDER IN DECLINE: UNDERSTANDING THE DRIVERS OF U.S.–RUSSIA ARMS CONTROL FAILURE

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Abstract

This study examines the growing fragility of strategic stability between the United States and Russia in the aftermath of the collapse of key arms-control agreements. Since the end of the Cold War, both states have framed stability as a central objective of their foreign and defense policies, yet the past decade has witnessed accelerated military modernization, deepening geopolitical mistrust, and the erosion of longstanding restraints. The U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and Russia's suspension of New START—now approaching its expiration in 2026—have left the world's two largest nuclear powers without a functioning framework to manage their rivalry. Attempts at diplomatic revival since 2025 briefly raised hopes, but the ongoing war in Ukraine, NATO–Russia tensions, and domestic skepticism toward arms control in both capitals have halted progress. Drawing on recent developments, including the modernization of nuclear arsenals, the deterioration of compliance mechanisms, and shifting threat perceptions, this study argues that the U.S. and Russia are re-entering an action–reaction spiral which is explained by two-level games, proposed by Robert Putnam in 1988. The continuous hostility between US and Russia risks triggering new missile deployments in Europe, further weakening the global arms-control regime. All these facets along with risks and uncertainties involved in arms race will be discussed in this study. The study will also assess whether US and Russia can develop a framework for non-treaty options which both countries can mitigate in order to develop a working relation.

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining strategic stability has been the agenda of foreign and defense policies of both US and Russia since the end of the cold war. Arms reductions specifically nuclear weapons have been given special attention in their bilateral relations. In the last decade, however, Russia has strengthened its military capabilities many folds. On one hand, Russian invasion of Ukraine and Georgia, interference in Syrian civil war, NATO's expansion of its military capabilities and Russian overall military interference in Europe has raised tensions between the former Cold War rivals. On the other hand, US also announced its withdrawal from INF treaty on 2nd

August 2019. The reason presented for this withdrawal was that it undermines US strategic interests given Sino-Russian strategic partnership and Russian military activities in Europe. Russia denied US claims and accused Washington of withdrawing because it wants to pursue a new arms race.

In 2019, US withdrew from Intermediate-range Nuclear forces (INF) with and linked its participation to Russian dismantling of its intermediate-range missiles which US claims violate the terms of agreement. Russia which remained part of the treaty until August 2025 have always claimed that it has always abided by the terms and conditions of the

treaty and has promised not to deploy missiles unless US do it first. Both US and Russian officials have been casting allegations at each other about who is solely responsible for making the world more insecure.

After US withdrawal from INF treaty the only arms control treaty between the US and Russia remains is New START which put a limit on both countries for not exceeding the number of nuclear war heads beyond 1550. It is the last surviving arms control pact between Washington and Moscow which is also approaching its final sunset on February 5, 2026. Originally concluded in 2010 and enforced a year later, the accord covered the overwhelming majority of the world's nuclear stockpiles. It was designed for a decade with the option of a single five-year extension, which was exhausted in 2021. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, its implementation has been stalled, however in 2023 Russia officially suspended it citing western attack on its strategic air bases as a reason. Moscow also accused the United States of withdrawing from huge number of treaty commitments and engaged in so-called containment of the Russia. Even after the suspension, Russia declared that it would adhere to the quantitative constraints of the treaty. However, the Bilateral Consultative Commission that has acted as the consultative organ of the treaty is inactive and the wider structure of the collaboration between the two states has become very unstable.

As the deadline for NEW START treaty nears amid a grinding conflict, the global arms-control community is increasingly anxious about what may replace it or whether anything will. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced at the Russian security council meeting that Russia is “prepared to continue observing the central quantitative restrictions” of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) for one year after its expiration if the United States “acts in a similar spirit”. Once again, both countries are caught in an action–reaction spiral that undermines the prospects of any meaningful arms control mechanism.

Although with the demise of INF treaty, the Washington's testing of medium range, ground-based cruise missile in 2019 had already indicated that the two nuclear armed nations are on the verge of a 21st century arms race. However, when Donald

Trump returned to the White House, hopes of a diplomatic thaw were revived, following initial cease-fire talks on Ukraine. Both governments were also open to re-initiating arms-control negotiations. Early in 2025, Trump personally indicated that he was interested in resuming contacts with Moscow, with certain US legislators encouraging the Secretary of State Marco Rubio to request a new extension of the New START This was also of interest to the Kremlin, with Dmitry Peskov declaring that the new set of negotiations would be in the interests of the world. Nevertheless, when cease-fire efforts failed, the momentum declined. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov rejected the prospect of a complete revival of New START in the given circumstances, which explains that the geopolitical situation is unfriendly to the reconciliation

To this stagnation is added the absence of any other structure, which can be used to govern the strategic relationship between the two countries. At the same time, both US and Russia are upgrading their nuclear weapons, which poses a danger of escalating the competition. The SIPRI 2025 report indicates that the two countries are modernizing their nuclear delivery systems and warheads. The United States has spent a lot of money on modernizing its nuclear triad, with the purchase of over 200 upgraded nuclear weapons in 2023 by the NNSA. Moscow has criticized the Golden Dome missile-defence program of President Trump, which mostly targets Russian and Chinese potential, as too destabilizing. The policy makers in Moscow and Washington should put their focus on the ramifications of such developments because they can possibly trigger development of new INF missiles not just in Russia and US, but many other countries can follow the suit. US, Russia along with European NATO allies should really ponder what other alternative military means they can utilize to tackle such proliferations of arms? Europe in coming years might face another missiles deployment debate and there are chances that there will be building ups of missiles in both Russia and NATO countries. Such scenario will put negative impact on the strategic stability of the entire world. The emerging situation indicates that world is moving back at the 1970s. Both countries have come to full circle after years of dialogues on arms control.

The future of new START also seems gloomy given that both US and Russia may not pay any heed to calls for the adherence to the arms control commitments. This developing situation requires an assessment regarding general dissatisfaction on both sides with treaty compliance, Scepticism on arms control among decision makers both in Russia and US, Russian allegations of US non-compliance with new START and US allegations of Russian non-compliance with INF treaty, the poor track record of congress when it comes to forging new arms control treaties, and Russian interference in its neighbouring European countries for achieving strategic goals. All these factors have put heavy pressure on the sustainability of arms control regimes. Both Russia and US are the countries with most nuclear warheads in the world and such irresponsible behaviour from both would tarnish the credibility of international laws and regulations regarding arms control and would raise suspicions on future arms control agreements.

Apart from New START, NPT is also under heavy pressure since last few years. There is a clear violation of Article VI of the NPT from US and Russia countries, raising question that what is the purpose of treaties like NPT and New START when the two major nuclear powers are acting only according to their own strategic and national interests?

The strategic environment since 2010s have changed, with North Korea's nuclear provocations, Sino-Russian bilateral strategic cooperation and arms trade, Russia modernizing its weapons and carrying out military activities with its conventional forces, and US nuclear posture review of 2018 in which Secretary of Defence James Mattis outlines the threats US faces from other nuclear powers and the policies to maintain strategic stability of US.

All these notable developments in the last decade have put great pressure on nuclear world order. Such strategic environment will likely to increase the number of nuclear warheads around the world. It will also exacerbate the mistrust among countries most notably between Russia and US.

It is therefore hypothesized that the volume of spending of both US and Russia on arms to counter or match what other side is doing will trigger arms race which will negatively impact strategic stability of the world.

The major questions this emerging strategic environment is raising are:

- What kind of threat perceptions Russia and US have?
- Do US and Russia lack mutual interests in arms reduction?
- Can US and Russia exercise restraints on arms accumulation without any treaty?
- What kind of risks or uncertainties can arise if Russia and US engage in new arm race?

This study's objectives are to identify the risks and uncertainties involved in potential arm race between US and Russia. This emerging power dynamics would also impact countries aligned or allied with US and Russia. The study will also assess whether US and Russia can develop a framework for non-treaty options which both countries can mitigate in order to develop a working relation. It also has an objective of analysing what kind of threat perception both US and Russia hold against each other. Threat perceptions are based on each country's own understanding of reality which usually originate from past experiences, lack of trust and clash of strategic interests. Apart from this, study will analyse if US and Russia have incentives or mutual interests in forging a bilateral cooperation in foreseeable future. The study will explore potential options for US-Russia relationships and value, limitations and risks linked with each option.

Literature Review

Arms races are persistent feature of international relations which also leads to international crisis. Despite the apparent clarity of the subject, the scholarship of social sciences has yet to produce a single universally accepted definition. As the name suggests the arm race is an intense competition between two or more rival states in terms of producing technological and numerical superior arms. Theresa Claire Smith defines it as "arms race is understood as the participation of two or more nation-states in apparently competitive or interactive increases in quantity or quality of war material and/or persons under arms". Though a race usually involves at least two parties-independent states, one may be far more committed to racing than another". The subject is purposefully interdisciplinary. Scholars from international relations, political science,

economics, history, psychology, and even sociology have contributed to this debatable phenomenon. A Selected Bibliography of Arms Race Models and Related Subjects by Charles H. Anderton is a compilation of list of authors from different fields of social sciences who have contributed to this subject. The scale, scope and complex nature of the literature regarding arms race can be helpful for new researchers who want to explore the historical background, causes and strategic objectives.

Huntington's Arms Races: Prerequisites and Results is a classic, was written when cold war between two superpowers was at its peak and so was the race of acquiring more and more weapons. In order to understand the contemporary strategic environment between US and Russia, its essential to accumulate the knowledge of the time when arm race was in its full swing between these two same countries. Its one of the first studies on the subject and defies time and level in its usefulness.

For a general overview which could benefit both the new researchers and the experts, Plowshares into Swords: Arms Races in International Politics by Grant T Hammond provides a broad, accessible and well-organized introductory survey. It is highly useful for starters who wants to learn about definition, causes and affects of arm race. He has taken thematic and chronological approach to explore the core of arm race. Like wise Charles L. Glaser has also produced a useful overview regarding arm race but his work is more extensive than Hammond. He reviews literature regarding arm race. He argues for a broader and thorough understanding of the subject which should include causes of rational arming behavior, consequences and when a state should buildup arms. He invokes defensive realism to provide a conceptual framework for a state to arm race when necessary.

The research on consequences of arm race in 20th century lacks a fully developed theory that can conceptualize why and when states decides to go ahead with arm race. Even in contemporary times scholars mostly invoke realist paradigm to understand this phenomenon. Though the subject is interdisciplinary but the scholars from other fields or school of thoughts couldn't develop a model which could provide us with economical, sociological, psychological and international law's perspective.

The relations between US and Russia have never been cordial but after the end of cold war they did try to maintain strategic stability. Their relationship has taken many turns over the years and recent developments suggest that a current shift in their bilateral relations is concerning. Many experts are of the opinion that Russia is the only country in the world which can challenge US in terms of military power. Despite sharp decline in the quantity of nuclear warheads, Russia still possess missiles and bombers which can reach US territory. US has always perceived these weapons to be threatening for their national security.

In the western literature Russia is described frequently as troublemaker with lower threshold for the potential use of nuclear weapons. Ven Bruusgaard argues in his article The Future of Deterrence: Russian Strategic Deterrence that Russia may not launch a Ukraine-style hybrid operation against any NATO country but is fully committed to deter NATO from any kind of encroachment on its territory. US officials have perceived Russian doctrine 'escalate to de-escalate' as Russian willingness to use Nuclear weapons. Mathew kroenig presents arguments in his report. A strategy for deterring Russian de-escalation strike that though Russia hasn't changed its public military strategy but its explicit threats to NATO countries and escalation to de-escalation exercises indicate Russian aggressive nuclear policy. This also explains Russian weapon modernization and buildup programs.

Moreover, scholars and experts have expressed concerns regarding US and Russian nuclear modernization programs and demise of restraints on US and Russian arm buildups. They also expressed concerns about potential arm race these developments may trigger.

The book The nuclear seduction: Why the arms race does not matter-and what does seems to make a strong connection' between superpower intervention and the possibility of nuclear war. The author William a Schmartz and Charles Derber made a sharp division between the politics of opposition to the arms race and the politics of anti-intervention. They have challenged the recent literature on the arms race and possible eruption of nuclear war. They argue that its not the Russian arm buildups but the US political and strategic interventions that could

lead towards war. This book contributes majorly to both scholarly and political discourse.

Much has been written about arm race between Russia and US. There is a need to develop a political vision through literature regarding universal peace movement which could put a restraint on politics of arm race, rather than reacting defensively to the narrative of either side.

Theoretical explanation for US-Russia Arm race

The research argues that the historical rivalry between the United States and Russia has been trapped in a traditional security dilemma based on the realist paradigm. The mistrust is still there, even decades later, as both sides view each other as a great threat to them. The structural anarchy of international system is not the only factor that supports this action-reaction cycle. In fact it is further supported by domestic political constraints. The polarization of congress and lobbyist influence in the United States is negatively affecting the compliance and development of arms control agreements, which in turn serves to intensify the suspicions of the Russians about the intentions of the Americans. In Russia, the leadership ability to collaborate is limited by a centralized decision-making machine and strong anti-US public opinion. As a result, both nuclear powers remain locked in mutually reinforcing fears that perpetuate arms racing and strategic instability. Breaking this deadlock would require transformative shifts in doctrines, political incentives, and public narratives on both sides.

This study aims to explain the security dilemma between US and Russia through two level game theory. Understanding security Dilemma is important to traces the action-reaction dynamics or the mistrust between Russia and US. According to John Herz international environment is anarchic. Security of the state is the major concern for every state under anarchy. States are engaged in endless pursuit of power in order to secure themselves. This situation compels adversaries and neighbors to prepare for the worst. This is vicious cycle of ensuring security through maximization of power. In such situation security is viewed as zero-sum game. This leads to strategic instability as the adversary reacts to the potential threats to its security. According to Barry Buzan such situation give rise to

power security dilemma. Arms races and military modernization programs are its main components. The development of Nuclear weapons and missiles is ensued from security dilemma. Even deployment of defense system is a consequence of security dilemma among states.

Despite signing treaties and agreements to assure end to the global rivalry analysts wonder why all these assurances and promise of new era of partnership couldn't help solving the problem of security dilemma between US and Russia. Realists approach can better explain that why security dilemma persists. Both US and Russia still worried about each other's mutual destruction capabilities even after the end of their cold war rivalry. They both have differing views on how to deal with this security dilemma. The analysts ponder that why their mainstream foreign policy discourse is so rigid in their bilateral relations and its highly unlikely that they will break out of this security dilemma any time soon in near future.

The explanation of the US-Russian security dilemma indicates that cooperation is made difficult by domestic-level politics and divergence of interests in maintaining bilateral cooperation. Both US and Russia is involved in two- or three- level games that exacerbate the already persistent security dilemma.

The important and well-established conceptualization of two-level games was proposed by Robert Putnam in 1988. He is a prominent political scientist with major contribution on his credits to this field. In this two-level game chief negotiators, which include presidents and diplomats operating in foreign land, are placed in level I while legislatures, assorted interest groups and the general public are place in level II. A successful dialogue which results in any bilateral agreements is forged at level I while accept or endorsed at level II in both US and Russia. In both countries there is always a polarization between these two levels. In US level II operators have usually been seen at loggerheads with US polity. The congress and Business lobbies always get involved in agreements forged by level I representatives of US and Russia polity. They powerfully impact security and business-related agreements. For instance, the republican senators placed a temporary hold on the ratification of New start treaty in the late 2010s. The level II operators feared that proposed cuts to the funding and

buildups of US armed forces would undermine the credibility of the US strategic deterrent. Their objections were then handled by Obama administration through budgetary concessions and allocation of additional funds for the upgradation of the US armed forces. The missiles defense controversy between Russia and US is another example which demonstrates the impact US internal politics on their bilateral relations.

Another reason for this resolute security dilemma between US and Russia is that domestic and international politics is indistinguishable especially in US context. There is always a probability that legislators will become international negotiators in the upcoming government. It becomes difficult for them to pursue a policy they have been criticizing continuously from the bench. This illustrates the republican lawmaker's reluctance to cooperate with Russia on security issues. If this pattern of domestic level influencing the international politics continues within US then the security dilemma on the Russian side becomes perpetual. This provides legitimacy to the views of those in Russia who argue that any kind of rapprochement with US is a divergence from Russian interests and will strengthen US adversary towards Russia. Many such politicians are of the opinion that any negotiated deal with US will be futile as it will be strike down by US incumbent lawmakers.

Another example which further illustrates this two-level game is that several republicans in US congress resisted severely to the Obama administration's bid, in 2012, to abolish the Jackson-Vanik congressional amendment of 1974. This amendment allowed the congress to deny Russia normal trade relations with US permanently. Even during President Obama's tenure several business and human rights groups lobbied for compilation of list of those Russian officials who were found guilty of human right abuses. They also called for imposing visa bans and bank account freezes on these politicians. This was all contrary to Obama administration policy towards Russia.

From the Russian perspective, the involvement of legislative level in US-Russia bilateral relations increases uncertainty and suspicions about US intentions towards Russia. Congressionally approved agreements appear more credible to Kremlin. For

instance, Russia claimed that a resolution by congress in 2013, specifying the provisions of US missile defense systems clearly states that it wouldn't be used against Russia. This could greatly lessen the Russian worries with such defenses. But Moscow argues that without these clear congressional guarantees, its difficult for Russia to make an assumption about future prospects of US-Russia relations.

Identifying Level II in Russian political system is a more complicated task. Russian federal legislative bodies rarely voice their disagreements with the president and other members of government on higher positions. That's how political system in Russia works. Especially since the parliamentary elections of December 2003, the foreign policy decisions are mostly taken by close-knit group of ruling elites. There hasn't been reported a case where parliamentary politics have imposed any limit on the range of options available to the government. The only credible structure of level II in Russia exists between government and the general public. Despite heavy censorship on media Moscow finds it difficult to control or modify the general opinion on foreign policy decisions. For instance, even at the peak of US-Russian bilateral convergence in August 2011, a public survey at the time showed that 29% of the Russian citizen regard US as an enemy.

When Russian authorities made an agreement with US in 2012 that they will allow US and NATO to deploy a transit center for cargo in the Russian city of Ulyanovsk, the locals surprisingly took to streets to protest this deployment. The rallies were organized against US despite the reassurance of Russian government officials with nationalist credentials that this transit center would not undermine Russian sovereignty and national security. The Russian oppositions tried to gain political advantage from this situation by exploiting deeply rooted anti-US and anti-NATO sentiments. They called government authorities "unpatriotic".

Thirty years after the end of cold war, the bilateral relationship between kremlin and White house is still resolutely characterized by the security dilemma. The public declaration of agreements of bilateral cooperation did not put any positive influence on their relations. A major explanation of this phenomenon of security dilemma is provided by the

realist school of thought which calls for an exchange of costly signals in order to lessen the tensions and misconception between two nuclear powers. In order to break out of this security dilemma both Russia and US are required to make major shifts in their political systems simultaneously. This includes nuclear doctrine, military posture, public opinion and key ideas which influence their foreign policy decision making and international strategic environment.

US-Russia Threat Perceptions

Before the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014, US officials portrayed Russia as a non-threatening potential ally with mutual security concerns. US wanted to forge a cooperative bilateral relation in order to keep China away from strategic partnership with Russia. But the spring of 2014 triggered a major shift in US perception regarding Russia. After the annexation of Crimea, US started seeing Russia as a major threat to US interests, European allies and world order. US regarded Russia's intervention in Ukraine as a grave breach of international law and universal concept of state sovereignty. US accused Russia of breaching territorial integrity of Ukraine which was very alarming for its European allies. All these developments built US perceptions towards Russia who started seeing it as a potential aggressor and should be dealt with iron hand. The violations of territorial integrity of Ukraine established Russia as a rule breaker. This perception then led the US to review the potential threat posed to it by Russia. Increase in Russian nationalism, military capabilities and Ukraine geo-political value fueled discontent in the American corridors of power against Russia. As these strategic anxieties accumulated, public sentiment in the United States also began to harden, reflecting how foreign policy shifts increasingly shaped domestic opinion.

In a Gallup survey conducted in 2019 regarding American citizens perception of Russia, 52% marked Russia as a "greatest enemy" which is a drastic increase from 18% in 2015. The apparent reason for this drastic change is the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and support for civil war in eastern Ukraine. This hardening public perception laid the groundwork for even sharper opinion shifts once the conflict escalated further in 2022. According to

recent data from the Pew Research Center, American attitudes toward the Russia-Ukraine war have shifted noticeably as the conflict—launched in February 2022 when Russia mounted a full-scale invasion of Ukraine after months of military buildup and failed diplomatic attempts over NATO expansion and the status of eastern Ukraine—continues into its fourth year. Only 44% of Americans now believe the United States has a responsibility to help Ukraine defend itself, down from 50% in late 2024, with a sharp partisan divide: two-thirds of Democrats hold this view compared with just 23% of Republicans. Roughly seven-in-ten Americans (69%) still consider the war important to U.S. national interests, though the share of Republicans who view it as personally important has dropped by 9 points since early 2024. Confidence in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also reflects this polarization—70% of Democrats express confidence in him compared with only 30% of Republicans—while half of Americans now label Russia an enemy of the United States, an 11-point decline from last year. Although 85% of Americans continue to view Russia unfavorably and 84% have little or no confidence in Vladimir Putin, Republicans have grown less likely than Democrats to hold strongly negative views. These evolving perceptions indicate how domestic political divides increasingly shape U.S. public opinion on a conflict that began with Russia's attempt to force geopolitical concessions from Kyiv, challenge the European security order, and reassert its sphere of influence.

A shift of this magnitude in Washington's strategic outlook did not emerge in a vacuum. Firstly, this change in perception is not sudden. The United States has experienced similar perceptual jolts in the past—most notably during the 2008 "August War" between Russia and Georgia, when Moscow's military intervention triggered alarm bells in Washington and briefly revived anti-Russian assumptions among policymakers. Yet that shift proved short-lived. Ukraine, unlike Georgia, carries far greater geopolitical weight for the United States; thus, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, followed by the full-scale invasion in 2022, was interpreted not as a regional anomaly but as a direct challenge to the European security order. That geopolitical significance explains why the recalibration of American threat perceptions has been deeper, more

sustained, and far more politically resonant than in 2008.

Secondly, the shift has unfolded within an already-fertile narrative environment. Over time, US political discourse and popular culture—ranging from congressional hearings to Hollywood’s portrayal of Russian antagonists—have cultivated an enduring image of Russia as a systemic rival. A systematic discourse analysis would show that these cultural cues reinforced policymakers’ readiness to interpret Russia’s actions through a threat-centric lens. Against this backdrop, the invasion of Ukraine became the catalytic “action” that triggered a powerful “reaction,” aligning public narratives, elite perceptions, and institutional policymaking around the idea of Russia as a major national security threat. When it comes to Russia’s threat perceptions, any change in US force structure or deployments could provide Russia with reasons to perceive such changes as threat to Russian security. A thorough study of historical timeline of US-Russia relations would highlight the fact that whether its US policy of modernization of weapons, introduction of concepts like preemptive strikes or preventive war, would cause anxiety within Russian decision makers. They will most likely to perceive them as directed against Russian interests. This point will further be elaborated through example that in 2006 there were speculations within Russian powerholders that US was trying to build useable first-strike nuclear capability. This ignited a debate in Russia regarding potential threats US posed to Russian forces. Russian arguments were that deployments of both conventional and nuclear weapons can increase the prospects of potential arm race so US wants to build a first-strike nuclear capability in order to gain an edge that can surpass Russia in terms of arm race.

Similarly, when media reported in 2003 that US was striving to build low-yield and bunker busting nuclear weapons, Russia gave an aggressive response warning US of hostile shift in their bilateral relations. Developments in strategic environment since then have confirmed the assessment that Russia and US are in potential arm race. This trend then compelled Russia to rely upon nuclear weapons against potential US threat.

These threat perceptions are not limited to just nuclear weapons. Russia and US chose to retaliate

politically and diplomatically to put forward their stances on their weapon acquisition policies. Russians are of the view that NATO and US are using military bases in Baltic, Poland and Eastern Europe to encircle Russia with nuclear and conventional warheads. The failure of NATO countries to ratify CFE treaty, and its enlargement ensued in imbalance of conventional weapons and the US presence in Eastern Europe was perceived as strategic threats by Russia.

Lack of Mutual Interests in Arms Reduction

Developments in geopolitics are also in the process of increasing distrust between the United States and Russia. The urge by France towards enhancing the nuclear deterrent of Europe and deploying of the Aegis missile-defence system in Poland has raised eyebrows among the Russians. Russia has responded by placing tactical nuclear armaments in Belarus and has declared it will place the Oreshnik intermediate-range hypersonic missile in Belarus, which can strike the whole of the European continent. Russia too has indicated that it might lift its unilateral Intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) Treaty moratorium in response to U.S. installations of such forces in Europe and Asia. The announcement by Trump to order U.S nuclear submarines to be repositioned has escalated the situation further. All these counteract the transparency and restraint that has historically been the foundation of arms control.

Unless the New START is renewed, the two nations can be seen rapidly build up their nuclear armories to levels further than those permitted by the treaty. This unrestrained accumulation would heighten the military poses, fix suspicions, and rekindle Cold War-era feelings of rivalry. In the absence of verification measures and diplomatic protection, the two parties might be motivated to acquire more and more varied nuclear arsenals.

To achieve a permanent stability state, both Washington and Moscow will have to resume formal, institutionalized negotiations not just to put in a new treaty, but to make a new and comprehensive structure that will deal with the new technologies, local challenges and miscalculations of strategy. In the absence of this, the world may soon end up in the grip of a nuclear rivalry as it felt it had long forgotten.

The strategic policies of the late 2010s expressed this feeling rather clearly. National Security Strategy of 2017 categorically identified Russia as a revisionist state that was determined to redefine the international order, and the National Defense Strategy recognized that the United States was already in a strategic competition with Moscow. These official pronouncements highlighted another more significant issue, the decline of common interests in arms control and strategic stability were dragging Washington and Moscow into a new arms race, one that was both more destabilizing in technology and lacked the safeguard mechanisms that existed in the Cold War.

This trend escalated in the following years. The Biden Administration presented its classified National Security Strategy to Congress on October 12, 2022 with a public fact sheet codifying the dynamic threat environment. It singled out two broad strategic dilemmas, a resurgent post-Cold War great-power contest and transnational pressures such as climate change and transnational health crises. Most importantly, it claimed that the most urgent strategic imperative to our vision is the challenge posed by powers that overlay authoritarian rule with a revisionist foreign policy, specifically identifying China and Russia as offering different but complementary challenges.

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025 put these concepts into practice by prioritizing strategic competition not only against states but also by expediting investment in disruptive technologies - artificial intelligence, quantum computing and hypersonic weapons - a category of technologies that United States strategists now consider as part of the deterrent of multipolar competition. This competitive framework penetrated even into the previously rather muted strategic theatre of the arctic. The 2024 Arctic Strategy by the Department of Defense envisioned more awareness of the domain, resilient communications, and closer alignment with allies to keep the Russians at bay and protect the homeland as the Russian activity in the region keeps growing. Combined, these reports demonstrate that Russia is no longer a secondary or secondary-periodic issue, but a structurally inculcated challenger, whose ambitions, capabilities, and geopolitical alliances now determine US strategy in

Eastern Europe, along the emergent technological battlefield.

On the other hand, Russia also doesn't hesitate to take military action when it feels threatened or when its geopolitical interests are challenged. This explains its military adventures in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. On political front, Russia wants to exploit the loopholes in western democratic system through social media and full spectrum warfare. Russia also seeks to change the western-led international order and along with China wants to end US global hegemony. These contrasting narratives and competing interest will surely lead to more hostility in international relations.

Russia already have this threat perception that US and NATO countries seeking to encircle Russia with their Nuclear warheads. Due to this siege mentality Russia will always regard any move towards its supposedly sphere of influence as a security challenge. When it comes to finding common ground between Russia and US, it's clear the Moscow wants to forge any bilateral cooperative relations based on equality and on an equal footing with the west. Russians also want US and NATO members to give full recognition to its rightful security concerns in the Eurasian region and beyond. For this purpose Russia engages itself in nuclear saber rattling to exert pressure on US and its allies. Its change in nuclear doctrine in 2024 also indicates that Russia no longer consider threatening to use nuclear weapon a "Taboo". In fact it might find it crucial to keep the threat of US meddling at bay.

There has always been presence of grievances within Russia against west and US. Even after the end of cold war. But the only thing that has been changed is Russia superpower status and related ability to assert itself the way it used to during cold war.

In such hostile environment, the scope of finding any mutual interest in their bilateral relations seems limited. As far as US is concerned, Washington has devised its attention towards responding against Russians action through sanctions and quick fix policies like providing Ukraine with lethal weapons to fight Russian forces. But such tit for tat strategy will not bear any fruits for both Russia and US and they need to devise a mutual strategy to overcome their grievances against each other.

Arms Control without any Treaty

There are many ways that US and Russia can forge a cooperative bilateral relation in order to maintain transparency in their arms control dealings even without any treaty. But then such mutual understanding without any strings attached would be an imperfect substitute. Biannually, both countries can provide each other with data of total numbers of deployed and non-deployed strategic delivery vehicles, nuclear warheads and launchers. They can also share information about warheads and launchers being deployed at their military bases in any part of the region.

Furthermore, US and Russia could conduct confidential meetings where they can brief each side about any new strategic system that they are seeking to acquire capability of. The briefing can also provide each side with information about technicalities of any weapon system just like the proceedings under New START. They can also share photographs of their weapon system. Though it will be difficult for each side to verify, examine or measure any new system independently the way its possible through onsite inspections. Another challenge for both countries would be to compare large body of data with information acquired through NTM. They can also agree to let go of sophisticated denial operations in favor of monitoring each other's strategic nuclear forces. This could provide a minor substitute of provisions on non-interference in New START in which there is permission for the use of NTM for monitoring purposes. The purpose for such arms control measures would be to acknowledge that both US and Russia would be more secure if they will keep in check the estimation of the size, composition of other strategic warheads.

Lastly, Both Russia and US can develop expert-level working relations in order to improve understanding of their military doctrine and posture. Their arm control experts can agree to an agenda of strategic maneuvering, evolving strategic concepts and latest weapon systems. This kind of understanding would provide both side with opportunities to ask questions about each other's strategic thinking, threat perceptions and insecurities.

Risks and Uncertainties involved in Arms Race

The initiation of potential arm race after the demise of legally binding constraints like INF treaty and

most probably New START, US and Russia strategic forces would likely to confront each other with near-and long-term risks and uncertainties. Both countries are heading towards the capacity to exceed limit imposed by New START by mid-to-late 2020. Each can enhance the number of warheads by hundreds but neither side has the capacity to avoid risk and uncertainties that would ensue. They even lack capacity to alter the relative balancing if either side choose to exceed the limits imposed by NEW START. Given the current strategic environment, both sides would have their own reasons and foreign policy goals to increase the level of strategic nuclear force. In a bid to gain an edge over the other, both sides would then engage in an arm race that would risk bilateral trade in the 2020s, bilateral cooperation over regional and global issues and increase suspicions about an unconstrained US-Russian nuclear relations which can go about for a longer period of time. This would compound an overall strategic environment with uncertainties.

The potential arms race will challenge the credibility of both countries within Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Signatories and non-signatories would no longer consider their bilateral arms control framework as a role model for strategic nuclear cooperation and eventual nuclear disarmament as mentioned in Article VI of the treaty. The potential new arm race could fuel resentment within the NPT regarding arms control measurement. It can then sabotage the alternative mechanisms like Treaty on the prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This will increase risk of nuclear proliferation and even nuclear war in the world. It can also be detrimental for US relations with NATO countries. As a security guarantor US could face challenges to install a nuclear risk reduction strategy in Europe which could be chaotic for their common security strategy. There could also be domestic backlash against US security umbrella within NATO countries.

The renewed arms race can compel US and Russian intelligence communities to devote more resources to monitor their Strategic nuclear forces. This will put a great financial burden on their defense budget. Without any legally binding constraints US and Russia will have less informed and confident analytical judgements against each other. There would be opportunity costs for both countries for

diverting scarce national technical means (NTM) which includes satellites and technical analysts from other missions. There will be a great uncertainty for both countries to confirm the right numbers of nuclear warheads. No country will be able to assess the other's precise level of warheads with confidence. There will also be uncertainty about both countries' strategic nuclear forces and their operations. A mutual understanding of each other's nuclear posture will also diminish. They will have less information about new strategic nuclear systems ensued by the renewed arm race. Given the contemporary strategic trends, increase in number of warheads would also increase suspicions, divergence on strategy and threat perceptions.

Both countries are likely to face great risks and uncertainties regarding each other's intentions and capabilities possibly for an extended period. Increased uncertainty will make US and Russian policymakers and officials unable to independently confirm the authenticity of any information. The drastic increase in hostility would undermine the national security of both countries.

Conclusion

Given the current strategic trends, both US and Russia will face serious challenges of maintaining strategic stability. The hostile bilateral relations between these two countries will make reconciliation difficult on the matters such as, New START, Israel-Palestine and Israel- Iran rivalry and agreements on Ukraine. In order to find a way forward both countries will have to come on negotiating table in order to forge a workable relation. Nuclear deterrence will remain an integral part of the US security policy vis-à-vis Russia. US will keep investing in nuclear modernization and send a strong message to Russia and other rivals that nuclear warheads will remain a core part of the US armed force; and that the US is politically, militarily and mentality ready to use nuclear weapons in the defense of US national interests. Such attitude is in response to Russian revised nuclear posture which indicates lower threshold for nuclear use, especially of nonstrategic nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile Russia has also maintained that it would consider any move against its interests or national security will be considered as crossing a threshold

that can dramatically change the situation and open a Pandora box of catastrophic ramifications. The goal of both countries is to deter each other from any military activity against their vital interests. Such hostile attitude towards each other will undermine the world peace and strategic stability.

While arms control measures through legally binding constraints were sabotaged by both countries, they can still work on codifying an informal understanding in order to avoid any misunderstanding in assessing nuclear arsenals.

Although such an informal understanding can't control arm race but at least they can take up temporary measures to keep current strategic environment to go more unstable. They can also get time to explore substitutes of arm control treaties. The objective for such an understanding should be buying more time to reassess and let sanity prevail before an expensive and catastrophic missile build-up is solidified

Wise statesmanship requires constant search of opportunities for cooperation on divergent interests. Both countries can mutually benefit from collaboration on counter terrorism, arms control and non-interference in one another's vital matters. If US and Russia can do it in Detente period during cold war, there are chances they can do it now given the intense geo-political landscape of the world which will harm both countries.

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