



Trump 2.0: Unilateralism and the Future of Arms Control

By

Syed Ali Abbas

As the world prepares for Donald Trump's return to the White House, the implications for global arms control loom large. New START, the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia, is set to expire in February 2026. Russian president Vladimir Putin suspended participation in the treaty a year ago due to tensions resulting from the Ukraine war, which leaves the agreement or any like it in question.

This important agreement, which places limits on strategic nuclear arsenals and provides verification mechanisms, may face an uncertain future under Trump's leadership. During his first term, President Trump demonstrated a dislike of arms control, a trend that could seriously undermine multilateral efforts in maintaining global strategic stability.

Trump's Arms Control Record

During Trump's first term, the United States withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, a landmark agreement with Russia that had eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons. While the US cited Russian violations of the treaty as the reason for American withdrawal, the move is concerning for European security and removes a crucial safeguard against nuclear escalation.

Trump also expressed skepticism toward extending New START, instead demanding the inclusion of China in future agreements. While China is increasing its nuclear capabilities, its nuclear arsenal remains smaller than the American and Russian arsenals. Trump's insistence on China's inclusion delayed negotiations, nearly causing the treaty to lapse even before the Biden administration secured its five-year extension.

These actions reflect a broader pattern of undermining multilateral arms control frameworks. Trump's transactional approach prioritizes American advantage over long-term global stability, raising concerns about the future of arms control agreements under his leadership. Given his resounding victory in the recent election, the American people support his "America first" agenda, which will embolden Trump's efforts to pursue his approach further.

The Risks of Unilateralism

Arms control agreements like New START, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the now-defunct INF Treaty historically relied on multilateral cooperation to reduce the risks of nuclear conflict. These agreements were/are built on principles of mutual trust, verification, and a shared commitment to minimizing the threat of nuclear escalation. Russia's suspension of New START and increasing US-China and US-North Korea tensions further empower Trump's unilateralism. Taken together, the already fragile architecture of global arms control is likely to fracture.

If Trump allows New START to expire or pursues a renegotiation on his terms, the consequences could be severe, with both openly increasing their strategic nuclear forces.



A Fragmented Global Landscape

The dissolution of New START would not only impact Russo-American relations but also have negative implications for global security. European NATO member states are, however, more concerned about the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent. The bigger threat is Trump's withdrawal from NATO, which could spur NATO member-states to expand their own arsenals in nuclear-sharing arrangements, while others might consider developing independent nuclear capabilities. This fragmentation could destabilize the transatlantic alliance and further weaken the global arms control regime.

Beyond Europe, arms control agreements are importantly observed by all states. In the Middle East, where tensions are already high, countries like Iran might accelerate its nuclear program. Similarly, North Korea may interpret American instability in arms control as an opportunity to modernize its arsenal.

Emerging Technologies and Strategic Instability

The erosion of multilateralism in arms control is compounded by the rise of emerging technologies such as hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, and cyber warfare. These advancements could transform the nature of modern conflict, introducing new challenges that traditional arms control frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

Under Trump's leadership, the US is likely to prioritize investments in these technologies, potentially at the expense of traditional arms control efforts. For example, Trump's first term emphasized missile defense systems, which Russia perceives as destabilizing. In response, Moscow invested heavily in countermeasures like hypersonic weapons. The potential weaponization of space and advancements in cyber capabilities further complicates the strategic landscape, creating new risks of miscalculation and escalation.

Lessons from History and the Importance of Multilateralism in Arms Control

The history of arms control offers valuable lessons about the importance of cooperation. Agreements like the INF Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty were not merely symbolic but played critical roles in reducing nuclear risks during the Cold War. These treaties demonstrated that even adversaries could find common ground in the pursuit of mutual stability.

To mitigate risks, the international community must reaffirm its commitment to multilateral arms control. Organizations like the United Nations and NATO have a critical role to play in facilitating dialogue and promoting transparency. Only through a renewed commitment to multilateralism can the world hope to navigate the complex challenges of the 21st century and maintain global stability in the face of evolving threats.

Syed Ali Abbas is a Research Officer at the Center for International Strategic Studies in Islamabad. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.