



## Arms Control in an Age of Isolation: A Fading Hope?

By

Brandon Toliver

The delicate architecture of international security, built upon decades of painstaking negotiations and agreements, faces unprecedented challenges. From the erosion of established agreements and treaties to the resurgence of nationalist agendas, the world grapples with a shifting landscape where the specter of unconstrained nuclear proliferation is increasingly possible. President Donald Trump's "[America First](#)" agenda is perceived by many within the United States and among allies as American withdrawal from long-standing defense agreements. Thus, it is prompting a critical examination of the trajectory of global arms control.

Major events shaping the current arms control landscape include the unraveling of key treaties. The demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was triggered by Russian violations and the subsequent withdrawal by the United States—signaling a dangerous erosion of [strategic stability](#). When coupled with the uncertain future of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty ([New START](#)), which limits American and Russian operationally deployed strategic nuclear weapons, there are concerns about a return to unconstrained nuclear competition.

The last time such foundational treaties were absent the world was illuminated by the glow of vacuum tubes and dial telephones, not the intricate web of digital connectivity that now exists. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ([JCPOA](#)), the Iran nuclear deal, also suffered a significant blow when the first Trump administration lost faith in its validity—fueling anxieties about Iran's nuclear ambitions and the potential for [regional proliferation](#).

Trends in arms control are marked by a resurgence of great power competition and a decline in multilateralism. The rise of China as a military power, coupled with its rapid nuclear modernization, challenges the [existing arms control](#) framework, which largely focused on Russo-American relations. It is noteworthy that the US sided with Russia against a Western-led effort to further punish Russia at the United Nations for Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This was perhaps a move to spur Russian agreement to a truce in the conflict but is unusual.

The proliferation of advanced technologies, such as hypersonic weapons and artificial intelligence, further complicates arms control efforts, as these technologies have the power to threaten national sovereignty. The increasing use of cyber warfare and space-based weapons also creates new domains of conflict that are difficult to regulate.

Themes that dominate contemporary arms control discourse include the erosion of trust and the rise of strategic ambiguity. The breakdown of established treaties and the lack of transparency in military modernization programs are fueling distrust among nations. This apparent shift in doctrine may represent a genuine erosion of trust, or a calculated and abrupt pivot designed to reset a paradigm that is overly reliant on American leadership. The strategic ambiguity surrounding emerging technologies and the intentions of potential adversaries creates a [climate of uncertainty](#). The rise of nationalist agendas and the decline of multilateral institutions can undermine efforts to build consensus on arms control and nonproliferation.

President Trump's America First agenda and its associated call for allies to bare a larger burden of their own security impacts the arms control landscape. The withdrawal from the INF



Treaty and the JCPOA was, for some, a rejection of multilateral agreements and a preference for unilateral action.

[This approach](#) stood to alienate allies and emboldened adversaries, undermining efforts to build international consensus on arms control. The Trump administration's skepticism towards international institutions and its emphasis on American strength over international collaboration, which the administration sees as often at the expense of the United States, may contribute to the erosion of the remaining arms control framework. The reduction of funding for arms control initiatives and the appointment of officials with limited experience in this field signals a diminished commitment to nonproliferation.

The current arms control and nonproliferation landscape is marked by unprecedented challenges. The unraveling of key treaties, the resurgence of great power competition, and the rise of nationalist agendas create a volatile environment that may take unexpected turns. President Trump's America First agenda and its efforts to require greater cost sharing leave adversaries wondering if the United States intends to leave existing alliances. Addressing the challenges posed by the changes requires a renewed commitment to multilateralism, transparency, and dialogue. Only through concerted international efforts can the world hope to mitigate the risks posed by [unconstrained proliferation](#) and ensure a more stable and secure future.

*Brandon Toliver, PhD, serves on the A4 staff of Headquarters Air Force. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official guidance or position of the United States government, the Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or the United States Space Force.*