

## The Dawn of 2026 and Challenges to Non-Proliferation

By  
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The year 2026 arrives with looming threats of nuclear weapon employment more than ever, as the world is faced with eroding arms control agreements and the global environment seems increasingly fragile. With several key treaties set to expire in 2026 and countries rapidly expanding their nuclear arsenals in response to growing international conflict 2026 will be a defining moment, particularly as countries like Japan and Saudi Arabia contemplate nuclear weapon development. As diplomats of non-proliferation continue to call for disarmament, reality dictates that such talk is fantasy rather than a clear roadmap forward, underscoring a need for a realistic assessment of the challenges that lie ahead.

Most of the world's approximately [12,100](#) nuclear weapons are held by just a handful of major world powers. The U.S. and Russia hold nearly [87](#) percent of the world's nuclear weapons, with Russia possessing approximately [5,500](#) and the US holding approximately [5,177](#), declared weapons, many of which remain in a state of high alert. China possesses an estimated [600](#) operational nuclear weapons, with the number having grown by over 100 in recent years. France is estimated to have 290 warheads; the UK, 225; India, 180; and Pakistan, 170. These countries have all maintained stable stockpiles through modernization efforts. However, North Korea maintains an estimated [50](#) nuclear weapons, but is aggressively developing its nuclear delivery capabilities, including the development of solid-fueled ICBMs and nuclear-capable submarines with Russian backing.

These developments present the growth in nuclear arsenals and nuclear technology, rather than a reduction. The growth includes the qualitative development of nuclear delivery technology, such as hypersonic vehicles and Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs), which has undermined the existing balance in the arms race established because of the Cold War.

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New Start), which remains the last bilateral US-Russian nuclear weapons agreement, is scheduled to expire on February 5, 2026, without any proposed replacements because of disagreement on the treaty's terms. In 2023, Russia withdrew from the inspection and data sharing provisions in relation to Ukraine, but the two countries have openly stated to voluntarily meet their respective limit requirements under the treaty since then. If the treaty is allowed to lapse, it is anticipated that each side could begin to increase their nuclear weapons arsenal, which could prompt other nuclear-capable states, including China, to do likewise.

Additionally, the upcoming review conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) set to occur in New York in April 2026, presents additional challenges. Past NPT review conferences have been unable to reach a consensus primarily because of the anger expressed by non-nuclear states toward nuclear-armed states for failing to meet their obligations under Article VI of the treaty to pursue disarmament. As a result of this failure, several treaties relating to the regulation of nuclear weapons, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) have been signed but not ratified by key signatory states and therefore lack the needed verification mechanisms.

Iran may also be motivated to obtain nuclear weapons for the purpose of providing a deterrent against Israel's expanding conventional and nuclear capabilities. Iran's nuclear weapons program is one of the most pressing issues confronting the United States and Israel today. Iran is now stockpiling uranium-enriched to 60% levels that are close to the level of enrichment required to produce nuclear weapons. It is also developing new centrifuges at its underground facility, known as Fordow, and is shortening the time it takes to produce a nuclear weapon despite continuing economic sanctions and airstrikes against its military assets.

Further, North Korea indicated that 2025 would be a "[crucial year](#)" for its nuclear weapons development program and announced that it successfully tested its Hwasong-20 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and has increased the size of its nuclear facility at Yongbyon; it intends to complete construction of missile factories by 2026. Regional conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and in the Middle East, especially those involving Iran and Israel continue to pose a substantial risk of unintended escalation in the increasingly complex and multi-polar world we live in today.

Disarmament is nothing more than a relic of a bygone era. Nuclear-armed states are engaging in modernization efforts and the language used by these states appears to lower the threshold for using these weapons, seen from Russia's nuclear threats regarding Ukraine to the lowering of nuclear alert status. Verification is touted by some as much as possible through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); however, the nuclear powers are unwilling to provide the level of transparency needed to verify compliance with any proposed disarmament treaty. Furthermore, although non-proliferation efforts have successfully limited the number of new nuclear weapons being developed, until nuclear-armed states reduce their own arsenals, non-proliferation efforts will remain a hollow pillar.

In 2026, nuclear arsenals among the great powers are expected to continue expanding. At the same time, the expiration of New START is likely to lead to the failure of the NPT Review Conference, further weakening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime. These challenges will be compounded by the emergence of modern technologies, including artificial-intelligence-enabled command systems and hypersonic delivery vehicles, which increasingly blur the line between conventional and nuclear capabilities. When combined with the proliferation activities of states such as Iran and North Korea, these developments will place unprecedented strain on diplomatic efforts to prevent conflict and miscalculation. This risk is heightened further by escalating tensions among the world's major powers.

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