



## The origin of a nuclear world

The United States inaugurated a new atomic and nuclear world order with the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, a step that allowed Washington to hasten the end of World War II in the Pacific and maintain for a few years the technological and military monopoly of this new weapon with an unprecedented capacity for destruction. When the Soviet Union managed to develop its own bomb in 1949, nuclear deterrence became the central axis of a "Cold War" that would last almost until the end of the 20th century. Over time, other powers also joined the nuclear club, such as the United Kingdom, France and China, all members of the UN Security Council, making proliferation a global concern.

In this new strategic era marked by nuclear energy as an instrument of power, the arms race accelerated, with increasingly powerful nuclear tests multiplying, delivery systems were perfected to give rise to the current triads (strategic bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarines) and there was a rapid shift from fission bombs to thermonuclear weapons. of incomparably greater power and destructive capacity than that known in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The strategic logic that was imposed, for survival, was that of deterrence to avoid an all-out war for fear of mutually assured destruction. During the Cold War, nuclear weapons became a diplomatic tool that guaranteed international balance or so-called strategic stability. The confrontation between blocs went beyond proxy wars or ideological competition, it was fought in an arms race that accumulated arsenals capable of destroying the planet several times over. The alarms had several critical moments, such as the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 or the incident caused by the Able Archer-83 exercise<sup>1</sup> that led to the brink of a nuclear exchange due to misinterpretation of the opponent, situations at the limit that demonstrated that the risk was not abstract, but real and potentially immediate, as well as devastating. Avoiding the effects of these crises or misunderstandings pushed the great powers to maintain more direct lines of communication, protocols and guarantees that were much more precise and controlled, and to recognize that the nuclear race, although useful for deterrence, could also escape human control by mistake, escalation or accident.

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<sup>1</sup> COLOM PIELLA, Guillem, "When the world was on the verge of nuclear holocaust", available in <https://armada.defensa.gob.es/archivo/rgm/2017/06/rgm062017cap05.pdf>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

The international system, with the nuclear powers as guarantors and implicated, set out to avoid as much as possible the risk of an escalation of nuclear war, to limit access to these weapons and to contain the growth of arsenals through multilateral and bilateral treaties. The most important was the NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons)<sup>2</sup> of 1968, which established a "double commitment" architecture. On the one hand, non-nuclear-weapon States undertook not to acquire nuclear weapons and, on the other, nuclear Powers undertook to move towards disarmament and to facilitate the peaceful use of nuclear energy under supervision. To this base were added agreements to restrict nuclear tests, prohibit weapons in certain spaces such as the seabed or outer space and, especially, control mechanisms between the United States and the USSR to limit missiles and nuclear warheads. To achieve this, in addition to mutual trust and compliance with commitments, verification through on-the-spot inspections, exchange of information and technical observation (such as flights or satellites) was, and has been. At the same time, nations or regions that did not want to participate in this race set up nuclear-weapon-free zones through treaties such as those signed in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Africa, Southeast Asia and Central Asia that prevented the deployment, storage or testing of nuclear weapons in these territories.

### **A guarantee of safety, the New START**

Since signing their first arms limitation treaty more than fifty years ago on May 26, 1972, by Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow, Russia and the United States have significantly reduced their nuclear arsenals, although the numbers remain considerable. In 2025, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI),<sup>3</sup> which warned in its report that "the world's nuclear arsenals are being expanded and modernised", estimated that Russia had 5,459 nuclear warheads, the US 5,277 and China (600) surpassed France (290), the United Kingdom (225), India (180) and Pakistan (170) to become the third nuclear power. Other countries, such as Israel (90) and North Korea (50), have strengthened their arsenals in recent years and the atomic temptation is spreading across much of the planet. Some nations, in response to the increasingly

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)", available at <https://disarmament.unoda.org/es/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>3</sup> SIPRI, "World nuclear forces", available on <https://www.sipri.org/research/armament-and-disarmament/weapons-mass-destruction/world-nuclear-forces>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

volatile and unpredictable security environment, are contemplating the acquisition of nuclear weapons, such as the Nordic countries in a "Nordic nuke", <sup>4</sup>Japan or South Korea and, despite attacks and sanctions, Tehran has not abandoned its nuclear ambitions.

The New START Treaty<sup>5</sup> (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) was signed in 2010 in Prague by the then presidents of the United States, Barack Obama, and Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, after the end of the validity of previous treaties, such as SORT, <sup>6</sup>limiting the number of various types of vehicles and nuclear warheads that both countries could possess. It was proposed by US President Ronald Reagan and finally signed in 1991 by George H. W. Bush with his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, just half a year before the collapse of the USSR. The treaty also affected some of the new former Soviet republics, such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, which gave up their nuclear arsenals (at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Ukraine was the third nuclear power on the planet with nearly 3,000 nuclear weapons on its territory<sup>7</sup>). Its successor came into force in February 2011 and until its demise was the backbone of nuclear arms control between the US and Russia, limiting arsenals, facilitating data exchanges and establishing mutual inspections<sup>8</sup>.

The agreement limited each country to 1,550 strategic warheads and a maximum of 700 delivery vehicles (intercontinental ballistic missiles - ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles - SLBMs and bombers) that each country could deploy, six times less than the first START, and included important verification and transparency mechanisms that allowed stability through predictability (preventing unexpected stockpile increases that might require immediate responses). and access to information, verification, and data that fostered trust in the face of suspicion or friction generated by opacity or the unknown.

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<sup>4</sup> KIRKEGAARD, Jacob Funk, EURACTIV, "The time has sadly come for a Nordic nuclear weapon", 30 January 2026, available in <https://www.euractiv.com/opinion/the-time-has-sadly-come-for-a-nordic-nuclear-weapon/>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, "New START Treaty," available at <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>6</sup> Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, "Fact Sheet: Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT)," available at <https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-strategic-offensive-reductions-treaty-sort/>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson Center, "Ukraine and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons," October 15, 2018, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ukraine-and-the-treaty-the-non-proliferation-nuclear-weapons>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, "New START Treaty," available at <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty>. Accessed on 25.02.2026

In February 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that he was suspending his country's participation in the treaty due to Washington's support for Ukraine<sup>9</sup>, but shortly afterwards, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Moscow would continue to respect the limits of the agreement until the end of its validity in terms of the number of warheads it can deploy. At this end, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said<sup>10</sup> that Moscow views the expiration "negatively" and regrets it, stressing that it will be guided by "national interests" by applying a "responsible and attentive approach" to strategic nuclear stability and that, if there are "constructive" responses, there could be dialogue. At the same time, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that it could take "decisive measures" of a "military-technical" nature to counter threats but that, in the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's speech before the Duma, the limits will be respected as long as the United States, which never responded to the Russian president's proposal, does the same<sup>11</sup>.

In his second term in the White House, US President Donald Trump dismissed Russia's proposal to extend the treaty for a year, assuring, last January, that "if it expires, it expires<sup>12</sup>". The treaty only contemplated an extension and this was formalized in 2021 between then-Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin to extend the validity by five years<sup>13</sup>, until 2026, so a second extension was legally unfeasible. On the last day of the treaty, the U.S. president raised, on his social network Truth<sup>14</sup>, the possibility of drawing up a new agreement, assuring that "the United States is the most powerful country in the world... Instead of extending 'New START' (a poorly negotiated agreement by the United States that, apart from everything else, is being seriously violated), we should have our

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<sup>9</sup> BBC News, "Putin announces suspension of nuclear arms treaty he signed with US in speech demonising the West", 21 February 2023, available on <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-64717401>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>10</sup> SHARP, Alexandra, Foreign Policy, "U.S.-Russia New START Nuclear Arms Control Treaty Expires," February 5, 2026, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/02/05/new-start-treaty-nuclear-weapons-control-russia-us/>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>11</sup> Swissinfo, "Lavrov assures that Russia will respect the limits of START III as long as the US does the same", 5 February 2026, available in <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/lavrov-asegura-que-rusia-respetará-los-límites-del-start-iii-mientras-ee.uu.-haga-lo-mismo/90925810>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>12</sup> SANGER, David E. and BROAD, William J., The New York Times, "Nuclear Arms Control Era Comes to End Amid Global Rush for New Weapons," February 5, 2026, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/05/us/politics/new-start-nuclear-arms-control.html>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>13</sup> Arms Control Association, "U.S., Russia Extend New START for Five Years," March 2021, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-03/news/us-russia-extend-new-start-five-years>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>14</sup> Available at <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/116019511106186158>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

nuclear experts work on a new, improved, and modernized treaty that can last a long time into the future." Trump has also publicly defended that China must be part of a new pact since "it is carrying out a massive and deliberate increase in its nuclear arsenal, with the aim of reaching a level similar to that of the United States and Russia. This increase is opaque and is not subject to any limitations on arms control. This is the crux of the matter and is emblematic of the change that has taken place in the global strategic environment over the past 15 years."<sup>15</sup>

Beijing, through Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian<sup>16</sup>, has been categorical, Chinese nuclear forces "are not on the same scale" as those of the US and Russia, so Beijing will not participate "at this stage" in nuclear disarmament negotiations, but urges Washington and Moscow to resume dialogue and, in the immediate term, to contemplate formulas to continue observing limits. China has also reiterated that a "don't be the first to use" policy should be adopted, a call that has been rejected by both Washington and Moscow.

For UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the end of this treaty marks a "serious moment"<sup>17</sup> for global peace and security, while the EU stresses that the treaty was a "crucial" contribution to international and European security, calling for a return to obligations and inspections and the need for strategic dialogue and concrete steps to reduce. In the face of a new nuclear order, in which the Washington umbrella is no longer a sufficient guarantee, the United States' European allies and partners are signing nuclear agreements to guarantee its security, such as the "Northwood Declaration"<sup>18</sup>, signed in July 2025 by the United Kingdom and France to achieve unprecedented bilateral nuclear cooperation on the old continent.

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Statement to the Conference on Disarmament," Feb. 6, 2026, available at <https://www.state.gov/releases/under-secretary-for-arms-control-and-international-security-affairs/2026/02/statement-to-the-conference-on-disarmament>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>16</sup> DE LA CAL, Lucas, El Mundo, "China refuses to be part of a new treaty for nuclear arms control", February 5, 2026, available in <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2026/02/05/69848e03e9cf4a05628b459d.html>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations, "UN chief warns of 'grave moment' as final US-Russia nuclear arms treaty expires," February 4, 2026, available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/02/1166892>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>18</sup> UK Prime Minister's Office, "Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 (UK-France joint nuclear statement)", 10 July 2025, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

## An uncertain scenario

In a scenario marked by geopolitical uncertainty, the expiration of New START does not mean that the entire control architecture disappears completely, there remains a minimal but fundamental basis, the NPT. Signed in 1968, it is still in force and is for the majority of States the key to the global commitment to non-proliferation, access to peaceful uses of this energy and the vague objective of advancing towards disarmament. The problem is that it does not set specific limits on nuclear arsenals, functioning more as a legal or diplomatic framework, and it will not prevent the end of a half-century era of arms control between powers such as China, France or the United Kingdom that have not ratified the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons).<sup>19</sup>

The end of New START is not an isolated phenomenon, it is part of a broader reconfiguration of US foreign and security policy that includes, among other decisions of global impact, that of withdrawing from 66 international organizations that include 31 linked to the UN system, as well as various conventions and agencies, such as that of the World Health Organization or the Paris Agreement on climate change "since they do not serve American interests."<sup>20</sup>

This shift under the "America First" policy has been evident with the adoption of the new National Defense Strategy (NDS) <sup>21</sup>of January 23, 2026, a text that represents a significant doctrinal shift by prioritizing the defense of national interests and solid military deterrence, instead of leading or sustaining global norms of collective security. which explicitly recognises coexistence in an environment characterised by rivalry between great powers and the erosion of traditional mechanisms of global governance, in which it calls for a redistribution of responsibilities among allies and in which it affirms the commitment to maintain a modern and robust nuclear deterrent that can face threats defined by Washington. In this framework, the absence of New START fits with the logic

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<sup>19</sup> United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons", available in <https://disarmament.unoda.org/en/our-work/weapons-mass-destruction/nuclear-weapons/treaty-prohibition-nuclear-weapons>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>20</sup> The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Withdraws the United States from International Organizations Contrary to U.S. Interests," January 7, 2026, available at <https://www.state.gov/translations/spanish/hoja-informativa-el-presidente-donald-j-trump-retira-a-estados-unidos-de-organizaciones-internacionales-contrarias-a-los-intereses-de-estados-unidos>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

<sup>21</sup> Department of War, "2026 National Defense Strategy," Jan. 23, 2026, available on <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

of a defensive posture more focused on strategic competition, military force, deterrence and selective alliances than on the cooperative management of risks such as nuclear.

The perception of a US that is less committed to the multilateral order, of which it has been a guarantor since the middle of the last century, and alien to disarmament conventions or rules may prompt other countries to reevaluate their own security strategies, whether they are nuclear powers, such as Russia or a rising China, or those that want to be or are not<sup>22</sup> yet. This leadership and regulatory vacuum may pose long-term proliferation risks, due to ambition and uncertainty, by increasing reliance on nuclear and conventional capabilities as tools of foreign policy and deterrence in a more competitive, polarised, less institutionalised geopolitical environment with greater strategic risks and instability due to misinterpretation or mistrust between the actors in the competition.

Any new nuclear limitation treaty that aims to avoid strategic tensions for decades, such as New START, will be a "long and difficult" process and in the short and medium term a three-way understanding between Washington, Moscow and Beijing is unlikely, but what does not seem impossible is that bilateral agreements will be reached. The challenge will be to achieve a minimum trust infrastructure in an era of "unpredictability" where rules disappear and diplomacy can be relegated. To this end, it must recover basic issues in nuclear safety such as the transparent exchange of data and information, institutional communication and fluid cooperation, credible and respected limits as well as involvement, trust and respect among the participants, which should be all countries with nuclear capacity and those that could have it in the future. It will also need to update its approach to include and limit new technologies, such as autonomous systems or hypersonic missiles. An obvious example is Russia, which has already tested weapons in combat that are not limited by New START, such as the "Oreshnik" hypersonic ballistic missile.

With fewer barriers to the accumulation and modernization of arsenals and greater difficulty in establishing universal norms on nuclear weapons or proliferation, as a bad omen on the horizon, assessing the historical relevance of mechanisms such as New

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<sup>22</sup> Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "How nuclear submarines could pave the way for nuclear weapons in South Korea," December 12, 2025, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2025/12/how-nuclear-submarines-could-pave-the-way-for-nuclear-weapons-in-south-korea/>. Accessed on 25.02.2026.

START is difficult. While they did not eliminate nuclear weapons or prevent all crises, they did create an international regime that achieved their limitation by combining deterrence, transparency, control, oversight, diplomacy and, crucially, trust. The existence of treaties, inspections, and channels of communication reduced the likelihood of accidental escalations and helped stabilize the relationship between rival powers. Today the rivalry continues, with more actors and more uncertainty, a risk multiplier that makes it necessary to achieve a shared and accepted order for the control of the proliferation and use of the most lethal weapon in the world.

This new situation, lacking predictability, transparency and verifiable boundaries between the two largest nuclear powers, opens up a scenario of competition without formal restrictions, where deterrence once again rests more on credible capacity, resilience of forces and doctrinal clarity than on shared and respected legal frameworks. The erosion of verification and dialogue mechanisms increases the risk of miscalculations, unintended escalations and action-reaction dynamics, especially in a context of modernization of arsenals and proliferation of new systems such as hypersonic vectors. In this context, strategic preparation, coordination with partners and the recovery, or reinvention, of instruments of mutual trust are not ancillary options, they are central elements to preserve the stability that facilitated agreements such as START.

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