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Avoiding a new nuclear arms race

How policymakers and experts
can revitalize arms control for
a new era

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Summary

- Increasing global tensions have led to the demise of agreements on arms control that provided a stabilizing base structure for the global security architecture. One example is the expiry of New START in February 2026, which means that, for the first time in over 50 years, there will be no agreed limits on the development or deployment of strategic nuclear weapons between the US and Russia.
- Meanwhile, China is still in the process of expanding and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. This expansion is happening at a fast pace, with the Chinese arsenal estimated to have doubled between 2020 and 2025.
- The deterioration of the geopolitical environment has led some experts to suggest that formal control of nuclear weapons is no longer feasible. Some strategists are even questioning whether it is desirable. This uncertainty provides a tense backdrop for the 2026 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).
- This research paper examines the current status of four key relationships between nuclear-armed states – those between the US and Russia; the US and China; the N5 group of states (China, France, Russia, the UK and the US); and India and Pakistan. The paper discusses whether there is potential to revitalize arms control – and, if so, what can realistically be achieved and how.
- As states worldwide are investing more in both their conventional and nuclear military capabilities, cooperation is crucial if states want to avoid being locked into a new, multi-party nuclear arms race. Evidence from the past shows that arms control agreements help to create a sense of strategic stability and play a crucial role in stopping arms-race dynamics from taking hold.
- Adopting an expanded conception of arms control could create space for renewed diplomacy. Nuclear-armed states that are not ready to engage in negotiations leading to a legally binding treaty may be more willing to commit to incremental steps instead. Such platforms can, in turn, provide a basis for future negotiations on a more traditional arms control agreement.
- For the purposes of this paper, therefore, arms control is defined broadly to include instruments such as confidence-building measures, strategic stability dialogues and other mechanisms for technical exchange, as well as normative and behavioural agreements.
- While the NPT and P5 process are important instruments that support global stability, a broader range of instruments that can include all nuclear weapons states is necessary to address the risk of nuclear escalation fully.
- There are three main actions that policymakers can take:
 - The first would be to build on existing agreements to reflect the current security environment – for example, updating or expanding notification agreements such as the missile-test notification agreement between China and Russia.
 - The second would be re-establishing strategic stability dialogues at the expert level, so that states can gain a more realistic sense of potential adversaries' thinking on new capabilities.

- Finally, using newer technologies or domains in which diplomatic positions are not yet hardened would allow states to explore new opportunities for cooperation and governance.

Key recommendations

- With the NPT review process under stress, the N5 should focus on improving the health of the NPT first and foremost. As an initial step, therefore, the five nuclear-armed states must agree on a minimum statement of support for the NPT, which demonstrates their commitment to the treaty's end goals. If they cannot get to this minimal level, the overall credibility of their treaty commitments may be called into question. The future of the NPT itself could even be in jeopardy.
- All nuclear-armed states ought to re-establish strategic stability dialogues to prevent an understanding gap from developing during a period of rearmament. Engaging in dialogue will allow states to properly calibrate their risk assessments and understandings of how escalation might take place in a crisis, as well as how to signal intent to de-escalate.
- Governments can use the development of new technologies as an opportunity for engagement. For example, dialogue on space-based systems could be easier to convene than that on arms control, because state positions are still being formed and there is a mutual understanding of space as a domain open to all.
- States should think regionally when analyzing potential escalation pathways. This will create opportunities to include other regional stakeholders in dialogues and agreements that could be helpful in depoliticizing difficult relationships, or simply in accounting for the whole strategic picture.
- States should ensure the health of their wider arms control community by investing in maintaining expertise. In particular, they should invest in training technical experts on what has worked in the past and supporting expert-level (or 'track 2') dialogues to build mutual understanding.

Introduction

The 1990s and early 2000s have been described as a ‘golden age of nuclear arms control’.¹ But a steady increase in global tensions since then has led to the demise of agreements on arms control that provided a stabilizing base structure for the global security architecture. With some strategists coming to believe that agreements like the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty or the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty were overly constraining, the US and Russia have both ignored, suspended, withdrawn from or violated a wide range of nuclear and conventional arms control treaties over the last 20 years. Other agreements have been allowed to expire without extension or replacement – most recently, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).²

The deterioration of the geopolitical environment has led some experts to suggest that this type of arms control is no longer feasible. Some even question whether it is desirable.³ However, as states worldwide are investing more money in their military capabilities, arms control is crucial if states want to reduce the risks of all-out war.⁴

The evidence from the Cold War shows that arms control agreements help to create a sense of strategic stability and play a crucial part in stopping arms-race dynamics from taking hold.⁵ Without those agreements, uncertainty and a lack of transparency about the size and structure of nuclear forces significantly increase the risk of inadvertent escalation in a crisis. If risks increase further, and the economic pressures of arms racing become apparent, arms control may become an attractive prospect again.

Given the technological changes since the end of the Cold War and the more complex strategic relationships among nuclear-armed states in the 21st century, new arms control agreements will likely look different from traditional bilateral treaties like New START.

For that reason, this paper defines arms control broadly to also include instruments such as confidence-building measures, strategic stability dialogues and other mechanisms for technical exchange, as well as normative and behavioural

1 Krepon, M. (2019), ‘The Golden Age of Nuclear Arms Control’, blog, Arms Control Wonk, 22 April 2019, <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1207168/the-golden-age-of-nuclear-arms-control>.

2 The INF treaty expired in August 2019, while New START expired in February 2026. No follow-on treaties are under negotiation at the time of writing. Several conventional arms control agreements that have been crucial for the post-Cold War peace in Europe have also been affected by the Russian reassessment of the utility of arms control. For instance, Russia suspended the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty in 2007 and finalized its withdrawal in 2023. Related instruments like the Vienna Document are also no longer being implemented. For additional detail, see Arms Control Association (2022), ‘U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Agreements at a Glance’, fact sheet, October 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/us-russian-nuclear-arms-control-agreements-glance>; Arms Control Association (2023), ‘The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and the Adapted CFE Treaty at a Glance’, fact sheet, November 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/conventional-armed-forces-europe-cfe-treaty-and-adapted-cfe-treaty-glance>; Rosa-Hernández, G. (2023), ‘How Russia’s retreat from the Vienna Document information exchange undermines European security’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 24 March 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/03/how-russias-retreat-from-the-vienna-document-information-exchange-undermines-european-security>.

3 Kühn, U. (2020), ‘Why Arms Control Is (Almost) Dead’, commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5 March 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2020/03/why-arms-control-is-almost-dead>; Trachtenberg, D. J. (2025), ‘Why Arms Control Must Fail’, National Institute for Public Policy Information Series, 12 June 2025, https://nipp.org/information_series/david-j-trachtenberg-why-arms-control-must-fail-no-627-july-12-2025.

4 Panda, A. (2025), *The New Nuclear Age: At the Precipice of Armageddon*, Cambridge: Polity, p. 77.

5 Krepon (2019), ‘The Golden Age of Nuclear Arms Control’.

agreements. A broader definition of arms control, based on that of Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin,⁶ which moves beyond referring exclusively to legally binding treaties, has become more common among practitioners as the space for a multilateral approach has become more constrained.⁷

An expanded conception of arms control could create space for diplomacy.⁸ States that are not ready to engage in negotiations leading to a new legally binding treaty may be more willing to commit to incremental steps. An example would be a technical-level dialogue on how new systems fit in with a country's stated nuclear doctrine. Such platforms can, in turn, provide a basis for future negotiations on a more traditional arms control agreement, as the diplomats and experts involved in the earlier technical dialogues will have a greater understanding of each other's threat perceptions and security interests.

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Arms control has previously relied on agreements being verifiable, often via on-site inspections of warheads and delivery systems, and observing where physical assets are deployed. The integration of new and disruptive technologies into military systems will require a rethinking of verification, as the move to digital or dual-use defence tech makes verification far more difficult and invasive. States will, for example, likely be unwilling or unable to share a software codebase. Agreements aimed at behavioural constraints could provide a solution to this problem.⁹

About this paper

The paper expands the discussion on arms control in multiple ways. First, it goes beyond the traditional focus on the US and Russia to discuss the relationships between other nuclear-armed states. Second, the paper also explains why China's nuclear build-up complicates some options for arms control, but might enable others. And finally, its discussion of behavioural and normative arms control variations adds to the emerging literature on these topics.

⁶ Schelling, T. C. and Halperin, M. H. (1988), *Strategy and arms control*, Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey.

⁷ US Mission to International Organizations in Geneva (2024), 'U.S. Statement to the NPT Preparatory Committee', 23 July 2024, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2024/07/23/statement-by-the-united-states-to-the-npt-preparatory-committee>.

⁸ Alberque, W. (2022), 'The new NATO strategic concept and the end of arms control', online analysis, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 30 June 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/06/the-new-nato-strategic-concept-and-the-end-of-arms-control>.

⁹ Kühn, U. and Williams, H. (2023), 'A New Approach to Arms Control: How to Safeguard Nuclear Weapons in an Era of Great-Power Politics', *Foreign Affairs*, 14 June 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/new-approach-arms-control>.

It will assess the possibility for new arms control agreements in four relationships between nuclear-armed states. Those relationships are:

- The US and Russia;
- The US and China;
- The N5 group of states (China, France, Russia, the UK and the US); and
- India and Pakistan.

The state-to-state relationships discussed in the paper are those with the greatest potential for escalation, mistrust and proliferation, making them critical focal points for reducing global security risks. Any arms control agreements between the countries involved would immediately reduce the risk of nuclear escalation.

In addition, these are relationships where there is some prospect of the states involved engaging in some form of arms control. North Korea was excluded from our study, as the prospects of the Kim Jong Un regime engaging in dialogue were considered much lower than for the four relationships listed above.

This paper distinguishes between the P5 – i.e. the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – and the N5, which refers to the five nuclear weapons states signed up to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The same five states currently make up both the P5 and the N5, though the composition of both groupings has varied in the history of the UN and the NPT.¹⁰ The overlap is further complicated through the existence of the P5 process, a dialogue process for the N5 in the context of the NPT. However, this paper does not want to add to the impression that nuclear weapons are required for permanent membership of the Security Council.

Each of the following sections of the paper will focus on one of the four relationships listed. These sections briefly outline the current state of the relationships, the stabilizing role that renewed arms control could play, and under what conditions arms control agreements might prosper. The paper closes with recommendations for how to arrive at those conditions.

The conditions under which arms control is most likely to take place have been constructed using data from a horizon-scan survey. Horizon-scanning aims to systematically identify and evaluate trends and opportunities for change, and determine whether specific factors are accelerating or decelerating trends. It draws on wide-ranging expertise to cover as many impressions as possible. Horizon-scan leaders then distil the most striking insights, contrasting and explaining diverging views and highlighting where experts agreed.

Our survey took a diverse group of arms control experts with specific expertise on at least one of the state relationships listed above through a series of questions on: 1) the state-to-state relationships in focus; and 2) the feasibility of reaching new arms control agreements generally over the next decade, with an emphasis

¹⁰ US Department of State (2019), 'The P5, the "N5," and the NPT Review Conference: Remarks by Dr Christopher Ashley Ford, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, Wilton Park Nonproliferation Conference, Wiston House, UK, transcript, 16 December 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-p5-the-n5-and-the-npt-review-conference>.

on opportunities for change.¹¹ The expert insights were then contextualized in the wider history of these state relationships, past negotiation experiences and current positions to reveal opportunities and make recommendations.

Why relationships between nuclear-armed states are breaking down and how progress on arms control can still be achieved

The US and Russia

The US and Russia share the most well-established arms control relationship among all the nuclear-armed states. As the two nuclear superpowers during the Cold War, they were connected via several treaties that contributed to reducing the numbers of nuclear warheads and delivery systems, or to increasing predictability and understanding between their officials.¹² While this kind of collaboration might feel counter-productive for an intense geopolitical rivalry, it highlights the important role arms control can play in creating strategic stability. Leaders from both states recognized that unfettered competition was not in their interest, as it was likely to be economically devastating and to increase risks to an unacceptable level, making unintended escalation more likely.

Ever since the 2002 decision of US president George W. Bush to leave the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, nuclear arms control between the US and Russia has been in decline. In the years since, the US and Russia have either suspended or withdrawn from several other treaties. In 2018, the US suspended its participation in the INF treaty after years of concern that Russia was violating the treaty's terms. Russia suspended New START in 2023 as it no longer wanted US inspectors to visit its facilities. New START expired altogether in February 2026. The US and Russia were originally expected to negotiate a follow-on treaty – as had happened with the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) and its predecessor agreements – but negotiations have yet to commence. The expiry of New START means that, for the first time in over 50 years, there will be no agreed limits on the development or deployment of strategic nuclear weapons between the US and Russia.

Russian president Vladimir Putin suggested in September 2025 that the two countries continue to uphold the central quantitative limits in the treaty. But the US has yet to respond to this proposal. During US president Donald Trump's first administration (2016–20), several members of his Republican Party were on the record expressing a view that, unless China also faced a limit, the US should let

¹¹ We contacted more than 30 well-respected and established arms control experts in Europe and North America and received 10 survey responses. The surveys provided rich qualitative data which aided the construction of the arms control scenarios set out in this paper.

¹² For an overview of strategic and non-strategic nuclear arms control agreements between the US and Russia, see Arms Control Association (2022), 'U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Agreements at a Glance'. In addition to the nuclear agreements, the US–Russia relationship was also governed by a range of conventional arms control treaties.

New START expire rather than engage in another treaty limiting the US strategic arsenal. The Trump administration expressed a preference for a trilateral agreement between the US, Russia and China.¹³

Putin's offer is likely motivated primarily by cost. The Kremlin is keen to avoid an expensive arms race, as its focus is on winning its war against Ukraine and maintaining its conventional arsenal for the war effort. Russia has also been developing strategic nuclear options that fall outside of New START limits. It has previously refused to discuss these systems with the US and has not offered to place them under a moratorium. The offer also does not include some of the most valuable elements of the treaty, such as the in-person inspections and data exchanges.

This context raises questions as to the authenticity of Putin's offer on New START, but provides an opportunity to maintain a baseline of mutual restraint while Russia is preoccupied with domestic challenges and the ongoing war on Ukraine. In addition, Russian government officials have repeatedly said that they would expect France and the UK to be part of any new comprehensive arms control agreements with the US, given that, from Russia's perspective, all three countries are part of a de facto nuclear alliance in NATO.¹⁴

Many of the states parties to the NPT are dissatisfied with what they perceive to be recent steps away from nuclear weapons reductions and an increased salience of nuclear weapons in general.

The US and Russia are under significant pressure to deliver something tangible at the NPT Review Conference in April–May 2026. Many of the states parties to the NPT are dissatisfied with what they perceive to be recent steps away from nuclear weapons reductions and an increased salience of nuclear weapons in general.

Agreeing to a one-year moratorium would allow the US and Russia to contribute something positive to the conference, and would likely be interpreted as a sign of goodwill and intent regarding nuclear proliferation. Experts consulted for this paper also highlighted the importance of supplementing a moratorium with additional confidence-building measures to increase the likelihood of a follow-on agreement. However, those experts thought such measures were unlikely to succeed.¹⁵

Beyond the role it could play at the review conference, a one-year moratorium is insufficient for maintaining strategic arms control between the US and Russia. It is equally important to find a way of retaining the knowledge generated through

¹³ Reif, K. and Taheran, S. (2019), 'Trump Arms Control Plans Draw Criticism', Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-06/news/trump-arms-control-plans-draw-criticism>.

¹⁴ Williams, H. (2025), 'Russian Inconsistency on Arms Control Is an Opportunity for Europe', Center for Strategic and International Studies Next Generation Nuclear Network, 12 May 2025, <https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/russian-inconsistency-on-arms-control-is-an-opportunity-for-europe>.

¹⁵ Expert surveys 3, 4 and 6.

the data exchanges and verification inspections.¹⁶ The US has reduced its capacity for participating in follow-on negotiations with layoffs and restructuring in the State Department. But much of the required knowledge is retained among experts outside of government and in the wider civil society. An expert-level dialogue (often referred to as ‘track 2’) effort on strategic arms control could therefore allow experts to share their knowledge and ensure some of it is passed on to the next generation of practitioners.

There are significant barriers to achieving new, legally binding arms control treaties. These barriers make even a more sustainable moratorium on strategic nuclear weapons unlikely to hold. The overall level of trust between the US and Russia is lower than had previously been the case. Both states updated their nuclear postures in 2024, with a greater emphasis placed on the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence.¹⁷ Significant parts of the strategic community in both countries see arms control as restraining rather than clarifying.

In the US, the strategic community is engaged in a debate about the future of US nuclear strategy. There is significant disagreement among experts, between those that support expanding the number of US warheads to counter both Russia and China, and others who think that nuclear deterrence can be maintained at the current levels.¹⁸ Until there is more internal clarity, the US is unlikely to be able to engage in arms control negotiations to decrease the numbers of deployed nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, similar dynamics are at play among Russian experts. Kremlin sanctions on certain foreign think-tanks and experts have made it harder for Russian experts to engage in dialogue with peers. Discussions on how to strengthen deterrence and the circumstances under which limited use of nuclear weapons might be considered also indicate the extent to which the expert community in Russia has moved away from arms control.¹⁹

Despite these challenges, arms control dialogues that work to maintain expert engagement and improve mutual understanding of doctrines and new technologies are important in creating greater clarity and reducing escalation risks at a dangerous time, and could still play a role.

¹⁶ This point was made in many of the expert surveys conducted for this study, as well as in an independent expert working group on New START held in October 2025.

¹⁷ Center for Strategic and International Studies (2024), ‘Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies: A Conversation with Acting Assistant Secretary Vipin Narang’, transcript, 1 August 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nuclear-threats-and-role-allies-conversation-acting-assistant-secretary-vipin-narang>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2024), ‘Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence’, executive order, 19 November 2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131.

¹⁸ Acton, J. M. (2025), *Optimal Deterrence: How the United States can preserve peace and prevent a nuclear arms race with China and Russia*, report, Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/report/optimal-deterrence>; Glaser, C. L., Acton, J. M. and Fetter, S. (2023), ‘The U.S. Nuclear Arsenal Can Deter Both China and Russia’, *Foreign Affairs*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/us-nuclear-arsenal-can-deter-both-china-and-russia>; Weaver, G. (2025), *Is extending the New START limits in the US national security interest?*, issue brief, Atlantic Council, 22 December 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/is-extending-the-new-start-limits-in-the-us-national-security-interest>.

¹⁹ Trenin, D., Avakyan, S. and Karaganov, S. (2024), *From Restraining To Deterring: Nuclear Weapons, Geopolitics and coalition strategy*, Moscow: Institute of World Military Economics and Strategy; Arndt, A. C. and Horowitz, L. (2022), *Nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia’s war against Ukraine: A Chronology*, working paper, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Arndt-Horowitz_Working-Paper_Nuclear_rhetoric_and_escalation_management_in_Russia_s_war_against_Ukraine.pdf.

Opportunities for progress on US–Russia arms control

Given the inauspicious context outlined above, our expert group estimated that arms control was most likely to emerge from a crisis of some kind. Pointing to how the 1961 Cuban Missile Crisis showed Presidents Kennedy and Khrushchev how quickly a nuclear crisis could escalate, most experts in our study argued that low levels of political will in both governments to work out risk-reduction measures, and the apparent belief on both sides that building up military capabilities and strengthening deterrence will be sufficient for preventing a crisis, meant it would likely require a crisis to relearn the Cold War lesson that deterrence without mutual reassurance was not sufficient for stability.

Russia’s war on Ukraine – and, specifically, the possibility of an end to that conflict – is another factor that could significantly affect the likelihood of arms control negotiations taking place, as well as the type of arms control that might emerge.

Not every type of peace agreement would be conducive to follow-on arms control. Since the start of the invasion in 2022, Russia has started to link Western support for Ukraine with Russia’s inability to maintain existing arms control agreements, claiming that arms control was a Western attempt to weaken Russia and no longer in Russia’s strategic interest.²⁰ This hardening of Russia’s stance means that the only way that a peace agreement could lead to more arms control is if it leads to a changed assessment in the Kremlin. In such a scenario, Russia would need to recognize again that it cannot solve its security policy issues by military means. A change of position like this seems far-fetched, especially if Russia gets what it wants from a peace deal and perceives its invasion of Ukraine to have been a success.²¹

If Russia’s international relationships were to deteriorate further, the Kremlin might be motivated to re-engage in arms control. For example, if a deterioration of the Russia–China relationship led to Russian concern about China’s nuclear build-up, Russia and the US might then be more amenable to working together on constraining China. Similarly, if Russia was interested in rebuilding its international legitimacy, it could engage in arms control to show willingness to re-engage with the international legal system or multilateral processes.

Finally, for both the US and Russia, benefits could be derived from technical dialogues aimed at improving mutual understanding of the role that the cyber and space domains and systems play in their strategic thinking. These domains are of growing importance in supporting military operations, and unintended escalation could take place in either domain as investments increase.

Dialogue could be a useful foundation for improving mutual understanding and leading to future agreements in those and related areas. A destabilizing technological breakthrough – whether that is in the development of new offensive military capabilities or in missile defence – could provide the incentive required to get the parties to re-engage on risk reduction and arms control.

²⁰ Lokker, N. (2025), ‘In Russia’s perceived war with the West, arms control is collateral damage’, commentary, European Leadership Network, 13 January 2025, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/in-russias-perceived-war-with-the-west-arms-control-is-collateral-damage>.

²¹ Schmidt, H.-J. (2016), ‘The Link between Conventional Arms Control and Crisis Management’, in Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.) (2016), *OSCE Yearbook 2015*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 267–76, <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783845273655-267>.

European NATO members are not unquestionably supportive of arms control between the US and Russia. While those countries have welcomed initiatives that limited weapons primarily aimed at Western Europe, or that would have found particular use on European territory (such as in the case of the INF), they have been wary that arms control agreements between the US and Russia could make them vulnerable to Russian coercion.²² Apparent alignment between Putin and Trump on international relations suggests the possibility of an arms control agreement that might be a win for them in terms of normalizing the strategic relationship between the US and Russia, but that would decrease European security.

A quid-pro-quo agreement could also suit a more transactional US administration whose senior members have repeatedly indicated that they would like to be less involved in European security arrangements.

A US–Russia negotiation over NATO nuclear-sharing agreements is not implausible. The US practice of stationing nuclear weapons in NATO member states has long been criticized by the Kremlin. In 2014, at the NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, Russia accused the US of being in violation of the NPT, with the Russian NPT delegation claiming that the NATO nuclear-sharing agreement constituted a transfer of nuclear weapons to the states that host them.²³ The US and the NATO countries that host US nuclear weapons continue to maintain that the arrangement is covered by the NPT, as it was already in place when the treaty was negotiated. Moreover, the US and the Soviet Union had agreed on language that accommodated this practice. But, in 2023, Russia took steps to position Russian nuclear weapons on the territory of Belarus to mirror the US deployments in Europe.

Even if unlikely, a scenario in which Russia proposes removing Russian nuclear weapons from Belarus in return for the US agreeing to remove its nuclear weapons from Europe is conceivable. This type of quid-pro-quo agreement could also suit a more transactional US administration whose senior members have repeatedly indicated that they would like to be less involved in European security arrangements.

For European governments, a proposal like this would be particularly disconcerting. Nuclear sharing was originally devised as a way to express the US commitment to NATO and protect Europe against Russian aggression. Any removal of US nuclear weapons from Europe could be interpreted as a political signal that the US is no longer committed to nuclear deterrence and is willing to cede Europe to Russia

²² Kulesa, L. (2020), *The Crisis Of Nuclear Arms Control And Its Impact On European Security*, paper, EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/eunpdc_no_66_kulesa.pdf.

²³ Alberque, W. (2017), *The NPT And The Origins Of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements*, paper, Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/alberque_npt_origins_nato_nuclear_2017.pdf.

in a spheres-of-influence-based foreign policy arrangement. These concerns have been intensified by US threats against Greenland, part of the territory of NATO ally Denmark, in January 2026.

The political environments in both the US and Russia make sweeping progress on arms control unlikely in the short term. But the above concerns show that it is important to find ways to maintain technical knowledge and arms control expertise in their expert and official government communities. Without the regular engagement and knowledge exchange that has been enabled through strategic stability dialogues, other technical exchanges, verification visits and formal treaty exchanges, it will be far harder to re-engage in arms control if the respective political environments become more amenable.

If the US and Russia do not invest in their expert communities, decades of knowledge and practical experience risk being lost as officials retire or leave government roles. These expert communities have suffered from the increased tensions between the two states in recent years, as information exchanges have become far more difficult due to visa restrictions and sanctions placed on think-tanks and individual experts. Measures should therefore be taken to remove or mitigate these barriers.

The US and China

Relations between the US and China are shaped much less by arms control than those between the US and Russia, with trade instead being the most significant element of the former. But after over a decade of deterioration in their strategic relationship, the US and China risk becoming locked in a downward spiral when it comes to security, in which each state might interpret the other's actions as having the most hostile intent imaginable and respond accordingly.²⁴

The US and China are only connected formally at the multilateral level. Both countries are states parties to the NPT, in which they are both recognized as official nuclear weapons states under the terms of the treaty. The US and China have worked together in the past to prevent proliferation – for example, when negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme. But there is no existing bilateral US–China arms control agreement, and no history of close, direct engagement on arms control for government officials or experts draw on.

Amid concerns about China's nuclear modernization and expansion programme in recent years, the US has expressed an interest in strategic arms control with China since the first Trump presidency. However, in response, China tends to point out the large discrepancies in their respective nuclear arsenals as justification for a lack of engagement.

China is still in the process of expanding and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. This expansion is happening at a fast pace. In 2025, China was estimated to have a stockpile of around 600 nuclear warheads,²⁵ compared with around 300 in 2020.

²⁴ Burds, P. (2024), 'The Security Paradox in China-U.S. Relations', *Arms Control Today*, 54 (September 2024), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-09/features/security-paradox-china-us-relations>.

²⁵ Kristensen, H. M., Korda, M., Johns, E. and Knight, M. (2025), 'Chinese nuclear weapons, 2025', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 81(2), pp. 135–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2467011>.

China has the fastest growing nuclear arsenal among the N5 countries (see section below), but this arsenal still does not compare in size to that of the US, which totalled around 3,700 warheads in 2025.²⁶

The opacity of the Chinese nuclear programme is causing concern, as well as the numbers involved and the speed of development. Beijing maintains that it has a ‘no first use’ (NFU) policy – meaning it would not use nuclear weapons first in the event of conflict. However, the growing diversity of Chinese nuclear weapons delivery systems and the vulnerability of China’s missile silo sites cast doubt on whether this apparent NFU policy will continue to hold. As Cold War strategy demonstrates, missile siloes’ visibility and fixed location can lead to a ‘use it or lose it’ dynamic, in which states might be tempted to use nuclear weapons if there is a risk that an adversary might target their siloes first.

Chinese officials have used references to their NFU policy as a reason not to engage in US requests for strategic stability talks, claiming that the NFU policy was clear enough in expressing China’s peaceful intent and no extra clarity was needed. Nonetheless, China has expressed some willingness to consider arms control dialogue. For example, it has previously proposed a ‘no first use of nuclear weapons’ treaty to the four other nuclear weapons states in the N5, and uses this broader proposal to signal willingness to engage in arms control to the rest of the world.²⁷

The US framing of nuclear competition as a ‘two-peer problem’ – casting both Russia and China as nuclear competitors with similar-sized nuclear arsenals to that of the US – is premature while the Chinese arsenal remains so much smaller.

China is concerned about being treated as a copy of the Soviet Union or Russia, and is not interested in repeating the dynamics of the Cold War.²⁸ The US framing of nuclear competition as a ‘two-peer problem’ – casting both Russia and China as nuclear competitors with similar-sized nuclear arsenals to that of the US – is premature while the Chinese arsenal remains so much smaller. More importantly, the framing risks playing into China’s unwillingness to engage in dialogue until it has reached parity with the US and Russia.

At the same time, the US counterforce strategy means that the US assures its deterrence through an ability to target an adversary’s nuclear systems. It is theoretically impossible, therefore, for China to reach parity, as any substantial

²⁶ Kristensen, H. M., Korda, M., Johns, E. and Knight, M. (2025), ‘United States nuclear weapons, 2025’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 81 (1), pp. 53–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2441624>.

²⁷ Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (2024), ‘Statement by the Chinese Delegation on Security Assurances at the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference’, 25 July 2024, https://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/dbtyw/cjik/202407/t20240731_11463826.htm.

²⁸ Reuters (2018), ‘China accuses U.S. of “Cold War mentality” with new nuclear policy’, 4 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-accuses-us-of-cold-war-mentality-with-new-nuclear-policy-idUSKBN1FO02P>.

increase on the part of China would trigger a build-up on the US side.²⁹ Given the high levels of concern in the US strategic community about China's nuclear expansion, it would be in Beijing's interest to engage on strategic stability talks, rather than risk being drawn into an unwinnable and destabilizing arms race.

Opportunities for progress on US–China arms control

As US strategists are engaged in an intense discussion as to whether the US needs to build up its own nuclear arsenal to maintain a counterforce strategy on Russia and China, it would be a good time for China to engage in dialogue explaining the reasoning behind its investment in nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

If those strategists in Washington advocating for a nuclear build-up win the argument, China might find itself in a three-sided insecurity spiral with the US and Russia, with each country attempting to achieve superiority over the other two and therefore triggering further expansion on all sides. Dialogue could provide stability and reassurance, allowing the states to avoid becoming locked into a new, multi-party nuclear arms race.

There are some areas where dialogue might be possible. For example, in 2024, presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping issued a joint statement on keeping AI out of nuclear decision-making processes. This statement could serve as a basis for dialogue on a reliable 'human-in-the-loop' failsafe and how that would work, aspects of AI that can be mutually beneficial in a nuclear context, and aspects that both countries can agree are harmful or destabilizing.

As well as AI, there is an opportunity to discuss space as a changing domain. The US and China have been engaging intermittently in an official (or 'track 1') space dialogue.³⁰ Given both states' investment in their space capabilities and likely growing presence, a reinvigoration of this process could lead to a development of new behavioural norms in space.³¹ As space systems have high strategic relevance for nuclear deterrence due to their role in command and control systems, intelligence and reconnaissance, and targeting, finding a better way of co-existing – or perhaps even cooperating – in space could help de-escalate tensions and could provide a foundation for future arms control agreements.

Missile-launch notifications are another promising area. Both the US and China already have their own ballistic missile launch notification agreements with Russia. China also provided one-off notifications to the US and Pacific regional states for a missile test in 2024, showing an appreciation of notices as a tool for

²⁹ US industrial capacity for new warhead assembly is a limiting factor. The US is unlikely to be able to respond quickly to any Chinese build-up. However, a significant number of warheads remain in storage or await disassembly. These 'spare' warheads could be returned to actively deployed status if necessary.

³⁰ Johnson-Freese, J. (2015), 'US-China: Civil Space Dialogue', *The Diplomat*, 7 August 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/us-china-a-civil-space-dialogue/>; US Department of State Office of the Spokesperson (2015), 'The First Meeting of the U.S.-China Space Dialogue', media note, 28 September 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/09/247394.htm>; China National Space Administration (2015), 'The First Meeting of the China-U.S. Civil Space Dialogue held in Beijing', 10 October 2015, <https://www.cnsa.gov.cn/english/n6465652/n6465653/c6480012/content.html>.

³¹ Cleobury, S. and Mennesson, M. (2025), 'NC3 Satellites and Strategic Stability: The Case for a Non-Targeting Commitment', *RSIS Publications*, <https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip25110-nc3-satellites-and-strategic-stability-the-case-for-a-non-targeting-commitment>.

de-escalation.³² There may be an opportunity to formalize the process around notification, reducing the risk of unintended escalation from missile tests and building trust for future risk-reduction steps.

However, all these measures would require Chinese officials and track 2 experts to engage fully in dialogue, not simply rely on previous government statements and positions, as has been the case when Chinese government officials have deflected attempts at engagement by referring to China's NFU policy. In 2019, China played a core role reinvesting in and revitalizing the P5 process – a dialogue format for the five nuclear-armed states in the NPT aimed at providing a confidential space in which they can have sensitive discussions to build confidence and increase strategic stability. The relatively closed nature of that process could allow for more frank and constructive engagement.

Equally importantly, the US and others must demonstrate the value of arms control to China for dialogue to succeed. The Chinese government appears unconvinced that arms control can provide sufficient reassurance. Investment in track 2 engagement between experts can play an important role in providing it.

The N5 nuclear-armed states

The N5 grouping of recognized nuclear-armed states (including China, France, Russia, the UK and the US) is important in the context of the NPT. However, there appears little in the way of progress on an agreement over the future of multilateral nuclear arms control.

There are significant differences between the five nuclear arsenals. The US and Russia are at one end of the spectrum as the two largest nuclear powers globally. France and the UK are at the lower end, with minimum deterrence postures. China is currently in the middle, actively modernizing and growing its arsenal as described in the previous section.

Under the terms of the NPT, the N5 powers are committed to engage in genuine dialogue towards the eventual disarmament and irreversible dismantlement of their nuclear weapons programmes.

However, the US insistence that strategic nuclear arms control would only be possible in the future if China was also a part of such agreements, and Russia's insistence that further nuclear reductions only make sense if the British and French arsenals are considered alongside that of the US, mean that there is some possibility to explore multilateral arms control as a group.

³² Maloney, A. (2024), 'Pursuing A Missile Pre-Launch Notification Agreement with China', Federation of American Scientists, 12 November 2024, <https://fas.org/publication/missile-prelaunch-notification-china>.

Under the terms of the NPT, the N5 powers are committed to engage in genuine dialogue towards the eventual disarmament and irreversible dismantlement of their nuclear weapons programmes. Engaging in arms control efforts is one way to signal ongoing commitment and progress towards this goal.

Ahead of the 2022 NPT Review Conference, the five countries issued a joint statement ‘on preventing nuclear war and avoiding arms races’. In this statement, they repeated the famous Reagan–Gorbachev formulation that ‘a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought’.³³ They also recommitted to the NPT, to their disarmament obligations under the treaty, and to working with ‘all states to create a security environment more conducive to progress on disarmament’.

Joint statements like this can be helpful to set a direction of travel, particularly at times in which action is more difficult. However, the January 2022 statement was undermined only a month later, after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The severe loss of trust in Russia as a result of its actions against Ukraine makes it difficult for the P5 to issue further statements or to take joint action. The idea that Russia is working towards an environment that facilitates future disarmament is not credible while it is engaging in a war of aggression against another state.

For the 2026 NPT Review Conference, there is an expectation from the majority of non-nuclear weapons states parties that the N5 will, at the least, find another, more credible formula that the group can agree on. If the five countries cannot even get to this minimal level, the overall credibility of the treaty commitments may be called into question. The future of the NPT itself could even be in jeopardy.

The P5 process does continue, but meetings are reported to be increasingly unproductive, as the five states cannot address some of the main challenges.³⁴ The kind of collaboration previously possible, such as P5 action on the JCPOA to constrain Iran’s nuclear programme, does not currently seem feasible as Russia in particular prioritizes other relationships, such as that with Iran, over closer P5 ties. After the JCPOA’s success, joint action on North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme was expected to follow. But that seems less likely than ever, not least because of Moscow’s pivot towards closer cooperation with Pyongyang since 2022.

Opportunities for progress on P5 arms control

As nuclear diplomacy dynamics are increasingly interconnected and multilateral instead of bilateral, a functioning P5 platform is vital. It allows the five states to clarify signalling and confirm intent regarding nuclear arsenals, development and use. Without strong contacts between the nuclear-armed states, the risk of unintended escalation becomes far greater.

³³ Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson (2022), ‘Joint Statement Of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear Weapon States On Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races’, policy paper, 3 January 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races>.

³⁴ Countryman, T. (2025), ‘The Potential of the P5 Process’, *Arms Control Today*, 55 (March 2025), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-03/features/potential-p5-process>.

The Institute for Science and Technology (IST), a California-based think-tank, is developing a prototype for a crisis communication hotline between the N5 powers. This initiative is one of the first intentional attempts to multilateralize a traditionally bilateral tool of diplomacy. A P5 hotline would allow both bilateral and multilateral contact, with the aim of encouraging a greater level of transparency between the five states.³⁵ So far, this idea has not been adopted by the N5, despite having been under discussion since 2019. But the IST project proves that options are available for the five nuclear weapons states to take joint action – if the political will exists.

Joint N5 action on arms control is most likely when all five countries share a common concern. An example could be if all five needed to safeguard the NPT against a threat of collapse, or if they became concerned that nuclear risks were becoming too great to manage. This type of concern may arise particularly in those strategic areas where new technologies are changing the risk calculus, such as space security or the role of AI in nuclear decision-making. Individual countries are still working out their positions on those matters, perhaps allowing room for dialogue as positions are not yet fully formed.³⁶ However, even this relatively low bar might be tricky to reach, as Russia has shown a lack of interest in focusing on emerging and disruptive technology challenges in a P5 context.³⁷

Another possibility for generating engagement on arms control is to view it through the lens of differentiated responsibilities. Nuclear responsibilities emerged as a dialogue principle to help states articulate how they see their own, and others', responsibilities for the management of nuclear risks and safe nuclear stewardship.³⁸

Identifying and clarifying responsibilities can help depoliticize a dialogue and lead to agreement on areas that can be tackled jointly. The UK has been a champion of an approach based on differentiated responsibilities, similar to its pursuit of understandings on responsible behaviour in cyberspace and outer space.³⁹

Such an approach could provide the starting point for an exploratory dialogue that leads to improved mutual understanding, and could act as a foundation for agreement on responsible behaviour – perhaps even leading to a code of conduct or a similar codification of behaviour. One contemporary challenge where a definition of nuclear responsibilities could be useful is in exploring the P5 commitment to not testing nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons states could

³⁵ Institute for Security and Technology (undated), 'CATALINK', <https://securityandtechnology.org/catalink> (accessed 22 Dec. 2025).

³⁶ Panda (2025), *The new nuclear age*, p. 32.

³⁷ Messieh, N. (2024), 'Russia's digital tech isolationism: Domestic innovation, digital fragmentation, and the Kremlin's push to replace Western digital technology', issue brief, Atlantic Council, 29 July 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russias-digital-tech-isolationism>.

³⁸ BASIC (2025), 'The Nuclear Responsibilities Approach and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)', 14 January 2025, <https://basicint.org/the-nuclear-responsibilities-approach-and-the-npt>.

³⁹ UK National Cyber Force (2023), 'Responsible Cyber Power in Practice (HTML)', guidance, 4 April 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responsible-cyber-power-in-practice/responsible-cyber-power-in-practice-html>; Liddle, A. (2021), 'Responsible behaviours in outer space: towards UNGA 76', blog post, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 8 June 2021, <https://blogs.fcdo.gov.uk/aidanliddle/2021/06/08/reducing-space-threats-towards-unga-76>.

seek to discuss the additional data they might hope to gain from tests, whether it is possible to acquire that data in other ways, what risks might arise from restarting testing and how to recommit to the moratorium.⁴⁰

The experts who engaged with the horizon-scan survey disagreed over the extent to which a perception or self-identity as a responsible nuclear weapons state would influence Chinese policy decisions. Some thought that China might be persuaded to engage in order to maintain its image as a Global South leader on nuclear issues.⁴¹ However, others warned against overestimating the value that China places on being seen as a responsible nuclear weapons state. China is significantly expanding its nuclear arsenal at the same time as many Global South states are arguing for tangible progress on disarmament.⁴² It appears likely therefore that focusing on areas of strategic interest for China will provide a more reliable route to dialogue than appealing to China's desire to be seen as a 'responsible' nuclear state.

Progress might also be possible if a smaller number of the P5 states see an opportunity to cooperate. At present, the Chinese nuclear arsenal is still closer in number to those of France and the UK than to those of Russia or the US. China, France and the UK could potentially seek to work together as a minilateral grouping, given their apparent shared desire for increased nuclear stability. Space security and the impact of new technologies on strategic stability may also be useful areas of convergence between the three.

China, France and the UK could potentially seek to work together as a minilateral grouping, given their apparent shared desire for increased nuclear stability.

Another opportunity lies in the risk-reduction measures that currently exist bilaterally or informally, such as missile-launch notification agreements (as discussed above). Russia already has bilateral ballistic missile-launch notification agreements in place with China and the US. These agreements ensure that there can be no misunderstanding over missile tests or scientific missile launches.

The P5 process could dedicate a meeting to discussing how these existing missile-launch agreement could be expanded to cover all five states. As three of those states already have bilateral notification agreements, and China has previously notified the US and other Pacific states of planned missile tests voluntarily, a notification agreement that works for all five states ought to be achievable.

The N5 relationship lends itself more towards exploratory strategic stability dialogue and potentially setting up new behavioural norms or codes of conduct. Over time, legally binding multilateral arms control agreements could emerge. But given

⁴⁰ United Nations (2025), 'Secretary-General's remarks at the Plenary Meeting on the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons [as delivered]', statement, António Guterres, Secretary-General, 26 September 2025, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2025-09-26/secretary-generals-remarks-the-plenary-meeting-the-international-day-for-the-total-elimination-of-nuclear-weapons-delivered>.

⁴¹ Expert survey 4.

⁴² Expert survey 8.

the difficulties in getting five states with a wide range of warhead numbers and types of delivery systems to agree on further cuts, focusing on escalatory or overly ambiguous behaviours, and how to reduce them, is the best option for now.

The most obvious first steps for the N5 ought to be strengthening the NPT and ensuring a successful outcome to the conference. These small initial steps should then lead to further steps on risk reduction, responsible behaviours and re-establishing productive dialogue in the P5 process.

India and Pakistan

After an escalation of violence along the Line of Contact in the disputed territories of Kashmir in May 2025, tensions between India and Pakistan have reached their highest point in decades. Since India became a nuclear-armed state in 1974 and Pakistan in 1998, there has been global concern that a future conventional war between the two states could escalate all the way to the nuclear level.

Over the last decade, conflict has escalated a little further each time, with the governments of both states taking longer to de-escalate, and political and media discourse continuing to stoke grievances, even when there is no active conflict. As Chiara Cervasio and Nicholas Wheeler point out, '[...] each bilateral crisis has set a new and more dangerous threshold for military action on both sides.'⁴³ Amid such volatility, arms control mechanisms are essential to stabilize the relationship and make options available to ensure that conflict does not reach the nuclear level.

Measures are in place that reduce risk and increase predictability. These measures include a 1971 military-to-military hotline, a 1988 mutual non-attack agreement covering civilian nuclear facilities and infrastructure, a 1991 agreement on prior notifications of military exercises, a 2005 agreement on ballistic-missile test notifications, and a 2007 agreement on nuclear accidents. The Indian and Pakistani governments were at one point negotiating additional confidence-building measures, but formal dialogue has been suspended since 2012. Engagement continues at the track 2 level, including among retired government officials on both sides, who use their connections to brief current officials on their discussions. But this level of contact is insufficient to support any agreement on more comprehensive confidence-building measures.

Although the military-to-military hotline helped the two countries reach a ceasefire in May 2025, other similar initiatives have been less effective. India and Pakistan have tried to establish a hotline between their respective prime ministers, similar to that between Washington and Moscow. But after two official launches, it remains rarely used. This also appears to be true of the direct hotline between the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers.⁴⁴

⁴³ Cervasio, C. and Wheeler, N. (2025), 'Restraint At Risk: The Anatomy Of India-Pakistan De-escalation', analysis, BASIC, 12 June 2025, <https://basicint.org/restraint-at-risk>.

⁴⁴ Newman, B. (2025), 'Five Key Concepts to Understand the India-Pakistan Crisis' (2025), explainer, Stimson Center, 20 May 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/five-key-concepts-to-understand-the-india-pakistan-crisis>.

Low levels of trust and insufficient communication infrastructure mean that India and Pakistan tend to rely on outside interventions to de-escalate and mediate conflict. In 2025, for example, the US tried to stay out of the conflict until tensions reached such a dangerous pitch that the Trump administration felt it could no longer stand by.⁴⁵

Third-party intervention is not a sufficient or reliable conflict-resolution mechanism. More robust confidence-building mechanisms and communication tools will therefore play an important role in increasing predictability and transparency. While hotlines exist, they are not used as systematically during a crisis as would be expected. Additional mechanisms – such as dialogue formats for officials who would be expected to use the hotlines in an emergency – could help to build the foundational trust required.

Increased trust is essential to reduce the chance of violent conflict, and would help control escalation if a conflict did break out. In the long term, confidence-building mechanisms could lead to further mutual non-targeting agreements.

One of the biggest barriers to developing stronger guardrails for the India–Pakistan relationship, and one of the most significant drivers of conflict, is the growth of nationalist sentiment in both countries.⁴⁶ Experts consulted for our study concluded that reducing this tendency might enable a breakthrough in the countries' nuclear relationship. A different government outlook in India and greater government stability in Pakistan could help, as both states are currently locked in a security dilemma that is made worse by their respective governments' tendencies to scapegoat the other for a range of domestic challenges.

The governments of India and Pakistan seem to be locked into a situation in which 'tough' rhetoric and robust action are deemed necessary for public approval. This dynamic encourages the authorities to inflame a crisis with negative rhetoric and brinkmanship, rather than seek to de-escalate. The two governments must develop a better sense of the escalation risk and realize that 'it is in their best mutual interest to build on their existing bilateral agreements'.⁴⁷

Another significant barrier is the conflict over Kashmir. This long-running conflict is increasingly linked to everything else in the relationship. Combining this with the regular incidents of terrorism that have led to border conflict in the past, it is easy to imagine a scenario in which dialogue resumes, but is halted again as soon as another attack takes place.

Meanwhile, the relationship between India and Pakistan cannot be isolated from their wider regional interactions. The state of India–China relations, in particular, could have a significant impact on a successful stabilization of India's relationship with Pakistan. Concerns about China's growing nuclear arsenal, or a rapid deterioration in India's relationship with China, may compel the Indian government to increase its stockpile of warheads or invest in new nuclear capabilities. If the

⁴⁵ Roth, A. (2025), 'Vance says US won't intervene in India-Pakistan conflict: 'None of our business'', *Guardian*, 8 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/08/jd-vance-india-pakistan>.

⁴⁶ Cournoyer, J., Badri, L. and Messmer, M. (2025), *Conflict prevention under pressure: How effective are the most common interventions, and are they fit for future conflicts?*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136451>.

⁴⁷ Expert survey 4.

India–Pakistan relationship is not sufficiently stable at that point, Pakistan would likely interpret any changes in the size or capability of India’s nuclear arsenal as a threat to national security. Pakistan may also be compelled to deepen its own relationship with China to safeguard against any aggression from India.

Opportunities for progress on India–Pakistan arms control

The US and India have become closer partners in their attempts to counter China in the Pacific, significantly expanding their cooperation on defence technology.⁴⁸ This cooperation between the US and India has been a concerning development for Pakistan. The issues of growing Chinese influence in the Pacific and US–India cooperation on defence technology should be addressed as part of any future dialogue formats to increase the chances of agreement on new confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan.

The most likely route to engagement starts with bilateral discussions on the sidelines of other meetings that Indian and Pakistani officials were already attending, such as meetings of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Track 2 dialogues on nuclear risk reduction between Indian and Pakistani experts have continued uninterrupted, even while official government relations have been at a low point. Both governments can therefore draw on a pool of well-connected experts who have a good understanding of perceptions across the border, and can advise on which proposals would be best received.

Once sufficient trust exists for the governments to begin negotiating expanded confidence-building measures, discussion should focus on measures to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and inadvertent escalation in a crisis.

Once sufficient trust exists for the governments to begin negotiating expanded confidence-building measures, discussion should focus on measures to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and inadvertent escalation in a crisis. In particular, these measures should include ways to increase mutual understanding of national nuclear doctrines, as well as improvements to crisis communication and incident response.

One such measure would be the creation of a technical dialogue, likely at the ‘track 1.5’ level, to include working-level officials and experts. This track can be used to explore how certain capabilities and deployments are understood across the border. Another dialogue track should be established to discuss actions that are seen as particularly escalatory, and the conditions under which both countries would consider nuclear use.

⁴⁸ Institute for International Security Studies (2024), ‘Chapter 3: Preferred Security Partner: Anchoring India in the Asia-Pacific’ in IISS (2024), *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2024*, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/asia-pacific-regional-security-assessment-2024/chapter-3>.

A third priority ought to be a discussion on accident and escalation risks at sea, as both countries have recently been expanding their naval capabilities.⁴⁹ This track could eventually lead to the negotiation of a formal incidents at sea (IncSea) agreement.⁵⁰ During the 1960s and 1970s, several European states were able to successfully negotiate IncSea agreements with the Soviet Union, because all parties recognized the potential for unintended escalation over maritime incidents. These agreements are a model that can work even when inter-state relationships are tense, as long as states parties acknowledge that there is an escalation risk to be managed.

Recommendations

For all nuclear-armed states:

- **Establish (or re-establish, in some cases) expert-level track 2 dialogues to discuss doctrines and the role of emerging technologies.** Such exchanges will reduce the risk of misunderstanding and misperception over time, lead to official-level discussions and can provide a foundation for other steps towards formal arms control. This could be done bilaterally, through the P5 process, or in other minilateral constellations and would ideally grow broader to encompass additional nuclear-armed states.

For the US and Russia:

- In the absence of new arms control negotiations nor strategic stability talks ongoing, **invest in supporting expert-level dialogues.** These dialogues are crucial to maintain knowledge and negotiation expertise, as well as to prepare the next generation of experts. Support must also include reducing barriers to expert meetings where possible, such as visa restrictions and sanctions placed on think-tanks and individual experts.
- **Assess which elements of New START can potentially be salvaged.** Although a one-year moratorium is unlikely to add much stability, it could help build confidence among other states at the 2026 NPT Review Conference that the US and Russia take arms control seriously.
- **Preserve or establish additional confidence-building measures around data-exchange or meetings to discuss new nuclear capabilities.** This would help ensure strategic stability and could provide information on which to build the next arms control agreement.

⁴⁹ Hussain, A. (2025), 'Are India and Pakistan preparing for a naval face-off in a future conflict?', Al Jazeera, 11 June 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/11/are-india-and-pakistan-preparing-for-a-naval-faceoff-in-a-future-conflict>.

⁵⁰ Cohn, N. (2012), 'An Incidents at Sea Agreement for South Asia', commentary, Stimson Center, 14 June 2012, <https://www.stimson.org/2012/an-incidents-at-sea-agreement-for-south-asia>.

For states wishing to engage more with China:

- **Focus on Chinese strategic interests and reframe engagement through this lens.** The case for full engagement can be made best in a P5 context, and by focusing on domains where China has demonstrated strategic interest – such as the interactions between space-based technologies, other emerging technologies and nuclear stability.
- **A responsible behaviour dialogue framing** could help open the door to further conversations.
- **Formalize existing missile-test and -launch notification agreements.** As China already has a missile-launch notification agreement with Russia, and also notifies other states ad hoc, formalizing such arrangements might be the most likely avenue to reach agreement.
- **France and the UK could identify areas of further bi- and trilateral cooperation,** due to their mutual interest in nuclear restraint and the greater similarity of their nuclear arsenals, as compared with the US and Russia. Such discussions could focus, for example, on escalatory or overly ambiguous behaviour.

For the N5:

- At the NPT Review Conference, **focus on joint actions to strengthen the treaty.** Suitable areas for joint statements or recommitments could be recommitting to the nuclear weapons-testing moratorium.
- Ahead of the next treaty review cycle, **re-establish a strong P5 track** to counter non-nuclear weapons states' concerns that the P5 are disengaged from the NPT.

For India and Pakistan:

- **Add bilateral meetings on the sidelines of bigger multilateral or regional meetings to help build confidence.** Establishing a formal dialogue is likely too big a step to take immediately, but a track 2 dialogue that aims to build up trust to enable a track 1.5 or track 1 initiative to discuss changing arsenals and new military capabilities would help create some additional stability and predictability.

Conclusion

A lack of political will is the biggest barrier to arms control right now. Strategists in most of the world's nuclear-armed states seem to believe that they will be better off investing in hard deterrence postures, strengthening conventional and nuclear deterrence alike and increasing risks. Various US experts have claimed that the best way to reduce risk is through enhancing deterrence.⁵¹

The US's experience – and that of the Soviet Union – in the Cold War ought to provide sufficient caution against this strategy. Security postures throughout the Cold War were in fact characterized by a mix of deterrence, resilience and reassurance. But the US and the Soviet Union grew to understand the importance of mutual restraint.

In the 21st century, the nuclear policy landscape is far more complex than in the Cold War period, with additional states possessing significant nuclear arsenals and the strategic relationships between nuclear-armed states being much more interconnected. The recent focus of strategists on increasing deterrence capabilities significantly increases the risk of inadvertent escalation across several potential regional flashpoints, such as in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Indian Ocean, while diplomatic channels for engagement have been reduced.

This paper shows that opportunities for engagement and progress towards arms control still exist in all four of the inter-state relationships discussed. Expert-level engagement will likely be the easiest route. Despite this, it is important to note that, in some cases, even that low-level co-operation may be difficult due to challenges with visa permissions, think-tanks and experts being under government sanctions and – above all – high levels of distrust between the nuclear-armed states.

Renewed engagement at the expert level is crucial for maintaining a bottom-line of mutual awareness, for generating new ideas and for training the next generation of experts. States must ensure that some degree of knowledge and capacity is retained for when engagement becomes politically feasible again.

The project behind this paper is an attempt to preserve some of the lessons learned in the Cold War, and to update those lessons for the present. Although it will take time and effort to persuade states to re-engage with one another, the reward will be a return to predictability and stability in nuclear affairs, and the avoidance of a costly new arms race.

⁵¹ Williams, H., Rodgers, J. and Kos, E. (2025), 'Returning to an Era of Competition and Nuclear Risk', commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 16 September 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chapter-3-returning-era-competition-and-nuclear-risk>.

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Cover image: A soldier stands before a nuclear missile formation consisting of DF-31BJ land-based intercontinental missiles during the V-Day military parade in Tian'anmen Square, Beijing, 3 September 2025.

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