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Perspectives of Bilateral Nuclear Arms Control between the U.S. and Russia

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Since our world entered the nuclear age, state policies on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have profoundly shaped international relations and global security. Nuclear weapons are often viewed as essential deterrents against potential adversaries, and for decades, experts have debated their role in conflict prevention, strategic stability, and arms control. In today's rapidly changing security environment, examining the approaches of nuclear-armed states has become increasingly important, especially as the ongoing Russo–Ukrainian war continues to destabilise regional and global security, with nuclear rhetoric escalating to alarming levels. This study examines the current state of bilateral nuclear arms control between the United States and the Russian Federation to assess its future trajectories. This topic remains highly relevant, as nuclear weapons continue to pose serious risks to international security, and the relationship between these two powers plays a central role in global stability. Moreover, long-standing arms control agreements are under increasing pressure from shifting geopolitical dynamics, technological developments, and changes in military doctrine.

KEYWORDS: nuclear arms control, non-strategic nuclear weapons, Russia, United States

Az USA és Oroszország közötti kétoldalú nukleáris fegyverzetellenőrzés kilátásai

Mióta világunk belépett a nukleáris korszakba, a tömegpusztító fegyverekkel kapcsolatos állami politikák alapvetően átalakították a nemzetközi kapcsolatokat és a globális biztonságot. A nukleáris fegyvereket gyakran tekintik alapvető elrettentő eszköznek a potenciális ellenfelekkel szemben, és a szakértők évtizedek óta vitatják szerepüket a konfliktusmegelőzésben, a stratégiai stabilitásban és a fegyverzetellenőrzésben. Napjaink gyorsan változó biztonsági környezetében egyre fontosabbá vált a nukleáris fegyverekkel rendelkező államok szakpolitikáinak vizsgálata, mivel a jelenleg zajló orosz–ukrán háború továbbra is destabilizálja a regionális és

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globális biztonságot, továbbá a nukleáris retorika riasztó szintre eszkalálódott. Ez a tanulmány az Egyesült Államok és az Oroszországi Föderáció közötti kétoldali nukleáris fegyverzetellenőrzés jelenlegi helyzetét vizsgálja, hogy felmérje jövőbeli pályáját. Ez a téma változatlanul rendkívül aktuális, mivel a nukleáris fegyverek továbbra is komoly kockázatot jelentenek a nemzetközi biztonságra, és a két hatalom közötti kapcsolat központi szerepet játszik a globális stabilitásban. Ráadásul a régóta fennálló fegyverzetellenőrzési megállapodások a változó geopolitikai dinamika, a technológiai fejlődés és a katonai doktrínák változásai miatt növekvő nyomás alatt állnak.

KULCSSZAVAK: nukleáris fegyverzetellenőrzés, nem-stratégiai nukleáris fegyverek, Egyesült Államok, Oroszország

The concept of nuclear deterrence underwent a significant transformation following the end of the Cold War, altering the dynamics of nuclear deterrence strategies and impacting nuclear arms control. While in the 20th century, nuclear deterrence was primarily based on the idea of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)¹, with the dissolution of the bipolar world order and the emergence of new security challenges, a novel approach to security governance was demanded, diverting attention and resources away from traditional arms control initiatives.² Consequently, the existing arms control regimes faced significant challenges and experienced a decline in their effectiveness, and many of them ceased to exist. In the changing geopolitical landscape and heightened tensions, arms control lost its special status in the bilateral relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation.

In 2021, some positive developments could be experienced in the field of bilateral nuclear arms control efforts between the United States and the Russian Federation. The extension of New START³ and the establishment of the Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD)⁴ gave cause for optimism about opening a new chapter in arms control agreements. However, they soon came under pressure due to heightened global tensions. Following the outbreak of the Russo–Ukrainian war, referred to as “special military operation” (SMO) in Russian terminology, SSD meetings were halted which further complicated prospects for future American–

1 The term „Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD) refers to a state where both the United States and the Soviet Union believed that possessing a strong nuclear arsenal would prevent their adversary from launching a nuclear attack due to fear of retaliation.

2 N. Rózsa, Péczeli, 2013.

3 The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) was ratified by the United States and Russia in 2011. It entered into force in 2011 and replaced both START I and the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty. New START aims to limit the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 for each country, as well as the number of deployed and non-deployed inter-continental ballistic missile launchers, submarine-launched ballistic missile launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments to a maximum of 800. One of the key features of New START is its verification measures, which include on-site inspections and the exchange of data. The treaty also includes a Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) to address any implementation issues that may arise.

4 The Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) was a series of bilateral talks between the United States and Russia aimed at reducing the risks of conflict and managing strategic competition, particularly in the nuclear sphere. Initiated in the aftermath of the Cold War and periodically revived, the dialogue sought to address issues such as arms control, transparency, and mechanisms for crisis communication. The most recent round of talks took place in 2021 but was suspended following the escalation of the Russian–Ukrainian war in 2022, further straining nuclear diplomacy between the two major powers.

Russian arms control agreements. Additionally, Moscow's choice to delay the meeting of the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) due to political and technical reasons in late 2022 disrupted both ongoing New START compliance monitoring and discussions on advanced strategic nuclear delivery systems. Even though Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergei Ryabkov stated that the postponement of the inspections should not be considered as an initiative step from Russia to terminate the treaty,⁵ Russian President Vladimir Putin soon announced the suspension of Russia's participation in New START on 21st February 2023.⁶ It is essential to note that while Putin has suspended Russia's participation, he has not formally withdrawn from the treaty itself. The Russian Foreign Ministry claims that the country still adheres to the central limitations of the New START treaty.⁷ Yet, the lack of on-site inspections raises concerns about the ability to effectively monitor compliance with the treaty's terms, which could potentially lead to an erosion of trust and further destabilisation of the already tense relationship between the U.S. and Russia.

This paper aims to overview the evolution of the official US and Russian standpoints regarding nuclear arms control since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022 and examines the case of non-strategic nuclear weapons, considering their role within the current security dynamics and arms control debates.

Official standpoints of the U.S. and Russia on bilateral nuclear arms control

As the world's two leading nuclear powers, the United States and Russia possess the largest and most sophisticated nuclear arsenals globally, approximately 88% of the world's total nuclear inventory.⁸ Before examining their official positions on nuclear arms control, it is useful to briefly outline the key similarities and differences in the nuclear doctrines and capabilities of these nations. "Table 1" below provides an overview of these aspects, offering context for the subsequent discussion on their respective approaches to nuclear policy and strategic stability.

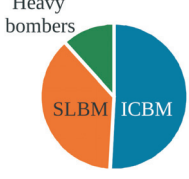
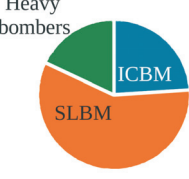
5 Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2022.

6 Президент России 2023a.

7 Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2023a.

8 Kristensen, Korda, Johns, Knight 2025a.

Table 1.
Overview of the nuclear doctrines and capabilities of the US and Russia⁹

Similarities and differences between the US and Russia		
	Russia	United States
Doctrine	Defensive in nature The nuclear weapons' main task is to deter adversaries and ensure the country's security Rejects genuine "no-first-use" policy	
	Does not mention arms control commitments	Places significant emphasis on arms control
	Provides a „nuclear umbrella” for Belarus	Provides "nuclear umbrella" for NATO countries, Australia, Japan, South Korea
	Does not name adversaries	Refers to Russia and China as nuclear rivals
Number of NW	5 459 warheads	5 177 warheads
Composition of the Nuclear Triad	1 718 deployed warheads 1 114 warheads in storage 1 150 retired 	1 770 deployed warheads 1 930 warheads in storage 1 477 retired 
Number of non-strategic NW	1,114 in Navy, Air Force, Ground Forces and Air defence	200 (100 in six European bases) B61 gravity bomb
Nuclear weapons sharing	Belarus (2023)	Italy, Germany (1950s), Turkey, Belgium, Netherlands (1960s)

In America, the Biden administration regarded arms control measures as crucial tools in managing the risks associated with the outbreak of armed conflicts and the proliferation of WMD. Furthermore, it is believed that arms control contributes to an integrated deterrence posture and helps enhancing national security and global stability. President Biden signalled a proactive stance aimed at addressing arms control issues, despite the prevailing security challenges, by emphasising readiness for diplomatic engagement.¹⁰ This approach was also manifested in the proposal of

⁹ The table was created by the author. Source: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist.

¹⁰ Bell 2023.

then-U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in June 2023. In his remarks at the Arms Control Association Annual Forum, Sullivan emphasised the need for new strategies and solutions to address the cracks of the post-Cold War nuclear foundation. He highlighted the importance of preventing an arms race, reducing the risk of misperception and escalation, and ensuring global safety from nuclear threats while extending the scope of arms control dialogue to a multilateral level by involving the P5 countries (France, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, the United States) in nuclear risk management and transparency measures.¹¹

Pranay Vaddi, a member of the U.S. National Security Council under the administration of President Joe Biden, commented on Sullivan's statement and summarised the three key principles underpinning the American approach to arms control. Firstly, the U.S. recognised the global security challenges and threats which require collaborative solutions. Despite disagreements between the U.S. and Russia on various international issues, it is crucial to keep making progress on arms control matters. Secondly, arms control is a cornerstone of international security, playing a crucial role in reducing tensions, preventing conflicts, and promoting stability among nations. Thirdly, the U.S. is committed to pursuing good-faith efforts to address WMD risks through arms control measures. This commitment reflects the understanding that WMDs pose significant threats to global security and must be addressed proactively and cooperatively among nations.¹²

Regarding the American standpoint on Russia, in September 2023, President Biden claimed that the United States continues to regard Russian nuclear signalling and threats as extremely irresponsible conduct. However, it does not perceive Russia's nuclear saber-rattling or its actions in Ukraine as obstacles to working together on managing nuclear risks. The U.S. maintained its view that cooperation on nuclear risk management is a separate and critical issue that should be addressed independently, and that the two countries do not need to reach a consensus on all matters to continue making progress on this issue. To this end, Washington was ready "to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia [...] without preconditions" and eager to engage Russia in discussions to manage nuclear risks and establish a post-2026 arms control framework.¹³

Russia did not welcome the United States' proposal. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov dismissed it as an American attempt to pursue a self-serving agenda under the guise of mitigating nuclear risks, all while maintaining hostile intentions towards Russia. He believed that the U.S. views Russia as an adversary but, at the same time, seeks advantages from engaging with Moscow.¹⁴ On 18th January 2024, Lavrov announced that Russia had rejected the United States' proposal to renew bilateral arms control talks.¹⁵ According to Arms Control Today, Lavrov said, "the proposal of the US side to launch a bilateral dialogue 'to manage nuclear risks and

11 U.S. Embassy, Consulates in Russia 2023.

12 Center for Strategic and International Studies 2024.

13 The White House 2023b.

14 Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2023b.

15 Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2023c.

develop a post-2026 arms control framework' is unacceptable to us [Russia]. Such ideas are completely inappropriate and untimely for they cannot be considered adequate to today's realities and to the state of Russia-US relations." Citing a Russian diplomatic note which NATO received from Lavrov, "now, the U.S. side does not demonstrate any interest in a mutually acceptable settlement of the current crisis [in Ukraine], does not show readiness to take into account Russia's security concerns.... Thus, there is no visible basis for a constructive and fruitful dialogue with the United States on strategic stability and arms control."¹⁶

Lavrov further emphasised the Russian standpoint in his interview on the results of the activities of Russian diplomacy in 2023. He expressed strong disapproval of American ideas, deeming them absurd and fundamentally unacceptable. He highlighted the context of what he referred to as "Washington-led hybrid aggression against Russia," stating that this situation provides no basis for further cooperation with the United States in areas, such as arms control, reduction of strategic risks, or even engaging in conversations regarding strategic stability.¹⁷ Later, he underlined that the actions of the U.S. are driven by an attempt to preserve its global hegemony. To this end, it is intentionally dismantling the arms control system by withdrawing from existing agreements, such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Open Skies Treaty, thereby demolishing established frameworks and creating conditions that hinder the other party from fulfilling its obligations.¹⁸ In a conclusion, Lavrov claimed that Russia made it clear that it will not engage in any dialogue with the U.S. until "Washington continues with its anti-Russia policies". It is not possible to keep arms control talks separate from the geopolitical context characterised by tense relations between the West and Moscow. Russia wants the United States to acknowledge its core security concerns and interests. In that case, Moscow would be open to launch arms control talks.¹⁹

Following the use of U.S.-supplied MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS long-range missiles) by Ukraine to strike targets within Russian territory, President Vladimir Putin updated Russia's nuclear doctrine in November 2024.²⁰ Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov explained to journalists that the modification was essential due to the "realities of today," referring to the conflict in Ukraine and the sharp escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. As an example, he pointed to the U.S. decision to allow its American-made weapons to be used against Russia, calling this a clear illustration of the new environment necessitating the changes.²¹

The new doctrine remained defensive in nature and kept the fundamental stance that nuclear weapons are a last-resort deterrent. However, unlike the 2020

16 Flatoff & Kimball 2024.

17 Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2023d.

18 Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2023c.

19 Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2023c.

20 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation 2024.

21 TACC 2024.

doctrine stated that Russia “considers nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence”,²² the word “exclusively” is no longer used – a subtle but notable change.²³ As before, Russian nuclear policy is aimed at deterring potential adversaries that view Russia as a potential enemy and possess nuclear, other WMD, or significant conventional military power. The new doctrine further expands this list by explicitly including states that allow their territory, airspace, maritime zones, or resources to be used for preparing or carrying out aggression against Russia. While no specific countries or alliances are named, it is implicitly aimed at NATO and Ukraine. Moreover, the number of “main military threats” has increased from six in 2020 to ten in the new version,²⁴ and the number of scenarios under which Russia might use nuclear weapons has increased from four to five.²⁵ It is also significant that “compliance with international arms control commitments”, as the first principle of nuclear deterrence, has been removed from the new documents, which indicates that Russia could stockpile nuclear warheads and missiles and even conduct nuclear tests while not contradicting its nuclear deterrence strategy.

The inauguration of Donald J. Trump in 2025 gave initial hopes for a positive shift in US-Russian arms control relations. Soon after starting his second term, President Trump expressed his wish to start nuclear arms control talks with Russia and China, and eventually to cut their defence budgets that are being spent on nuclear weapons.²⁶ The proposal for a U.S.-Russia-China trilateral agreement reflects broader US strategic interests and had also been on the Trump Administration’s agenda back in 2020.²⁷ Trump argued that such a strategy is necessary, explaining that China aims to at least double its nuclear stockpile within the next decade, while Russia advances the development of new, costly, and destabilising delivery technologies.²⁸

22 Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 19.11.2024 г. № 991 Об утверждении Основ государственной политики Российской Федерации в области ядерного сдерживания.

23 Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 02.06.2020 г. № 355 Об утверждении Основ государственной политики Российской Федерации в области ядерного сдерживания.

24 The new additions include: a) the creation of new or the expansion of existing military alliances that move their military infrastructure closer to Russia’s borders; b) actions by a potential adversary aimed at isolating parts of Russian territory, including blocking access to vital transport routes; c) actions by a potential adversary targeting environmentally hazardous facilities in Russia, which could cause technological, ecological, or social disasters; d) the planning and conducting of large-scale military exercises by a potential adversary near Russia’s borders.

25 *Two scenarios remained unchanged*: if there is verified information about the launch of ballistic missiles targeting Russia or its allies; and if an enemy attack disables critical government or military facilities, disrupting Russia’s nuclear response capabilities.

Two scenarios have been expanded: besides covering the use of nuclear or other WMD against Russian territory or its allies, now it also includes attacks on Russian military forces and facilities located outside Russia’s borders – effectively extending Russia’s “nuclear umbrella” to its overseas military bases; and reserving right to use nuclear weapons in response to conventional aggression against both Russia and Belarus, if it creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and/or territorial integrity.

One scenario is entirely new: Russia may use nuclear weapons if there is verified information about a large-scale launch of air- and space-based attack systems (including strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, drones, hypersonic weapons, etc.) crossing Russia’s borders.

26 Shalal, Holland 2025.

27 Balla, Kráncz, Szenes 2020, 100–106.

28 Reif, Bugos 2020.

China rejected the US initiative in 2020, stressing that trilateral arms control negotiations are more political manoeuvring than genuine, serious proposals. It also expressed reluctance to engage in multilateral negotiations unless Russia and the U.S. significantly reduce their stockpiles first.²⁹ Since President Donald Trump's re-election, Beijing has expected a more confrontational stance from the U.S. and has been preparing for a heightened strategic rivalry. China is likely to accelerate efforts to expand its nuclear arsenal, with a particular focus on strengthening its military Rocket Force's role in providing a "strategic counterbalance".³⁰

Regarding Trump's 2025 trilateral nuclear arms control talks initiative, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov highlighted that no specific negotiations have taken place yet, and it remains unclear when such contacts can be established. Russia maintains strong and developing relations with China, with ongoing dialogue on stability issues. However, the U.S. must manage its own relationship with Beijing.³¹

Furthermore, twenty members of Congress urged the Trump Administration to seek a new arms control agreement to replace New START and avoid a costly nuclear arms race with Russia. They also requested a State Department briefing on the administration's plans for the treaty which should be reflected in the next Nuclear Posture Review.³² So far, Washington has not taken any steps to replace New START, and Moscow has stated that the start of negotiations for a new strategic arms control agreement is not anticipated currently. Both countries are working to repair their severely damaged relations, but strategic arms control talks require a level of mutual trust and political will that is currently absent.³³

All in all, the expiration of New START on 4th February 2026 will leave unresolved concerns that necessitate attention and negotiation between the two nations. Additionally, the conflict in Ukraine has underscored a series of complex challenges that extend beyond regional dynamics and have broader implications for international security and arms control. Issues, such as the use of dual-capable weapon systems on the battlefield, the potential use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, and threats to use nuclear weapons emphasise the need for concerted efforts toward new sustainable arms control regimes.

Non-strategic nuclear weapons

The United States possesses a single type of non-strategic nuclear weapon in its arsenal in Europe, which is the B61 gravity bomb. This weapon is available in several variants: the B61-3 and the B61-4, with yields ranging from 0.3 to 170 kilotons, and the new B61-12 with a yield up to 50 kilotons. The B61-10 and other previous versions of this bomb were decommissioned. Currently, there are around 200 tactical

29 Consulate of the People's Republic of China in Laoag 2020.

30 Zhao, Tong 2024.

31 Интерфакс 2025.

32 Congress of the United States 2025.

33 Захарова 2025.

B61 bombs stockpiled. Approximately 100 of these are stored in the United States as a reserve stockpile, intended for potential deployment by US fighter-bombers (F-15E Strike Eagles) in support of allies beyond Europe, including Northeast Asia. The remaining 100 B61 bombs are believed to be deployed at six military bases located in five European countries: Aviano and Ghedi in Italy; Büchel in Germany; Incirlik in Turkey; Kleine Brogel in Belgium; and Volkel in the Netherlands.³⁴

The air forces of Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Turkey currently have an active role in nuclear strike missions involving US nuclear weapons. These weapons are typically under the control of US Air Force personnel, and their use in warfare requires authorisation from the US President. According to a factsheet released by NATO in 2022, any nuclear mission must obtain explicit political approval from NATO's Nuclear Planning Group and authorisation from both the US President and UK Prime Minister in case of using British nuclear weapons. Additionally, unless there has been a nuclear attack on NATO territory, it is unlikely that the entire Nuclear Planning Group would reach a consensus on approving the deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons from European bases. Even if NATO member states do not have nuclear weapons on their territory, they can contribute to a nuclear mission through conventional supporting operations, which is referred to as Support of Nuclear Operations with Conventional Air Tactics.³⁵

Russia possesses an estimated 1000–2000 non-strategic nuclear warheads, with a range not exceeding 5,500 km. Most of these warheads are dual-purpose, capable of carrying both nuclear and conventional payloads. The Russian Navy deploys approximately 704 non-strategic nuclear warheads, while the Russian Air Force deploys around 334 such warheads on various aircraft including Tu-22M3 (Backfire), Su-34 (Fullback), and MiG-31K (Foxhound) fighter jets. Roughly 345 nuclear warheads are assigned to air defence forces, including A-135 anti-ballistic missile defence system around Moscow. Dual-capable ground-based systems include the 9K720 Iskander (SS-26) short-range ballistic missile and the 9M729 (SSC-8) ground-launched cruise missile. Additionally, the 9M728 (SSC-7) short-range ground-launched cruise missile may also possess dual-capability, although this remains unconfirmed.³⁶

During the first two years of open warfare against Ukraine, Russian forces experienced their most severe military losses since the Great Patriotic War.³⁷ These losses in conventional arms have inadvertently strengthened NATO's conventional deterrence posture, shifting the regional balance. As a result, Moscow has placed growing emphasis on nuclear deterrence and intensified its nuclear signalling. This shift has brought the potential use of non-strategic nuclear weapons to the forefront of public and military discourse in Russia and abroad. In a contentious essay, Russian scholar Sergei Karaganov proposed the idea of Russia conducting limited nuclear strikes on Western Europe to re-establish nuclear deterrence and potentially bring

34 Kristensen, Korda, Johns, Knight 2025b, 69–70.

35 NATO 2022.

36 Kristensen, Korda, Johns, Knight 2025c, 224–229.

37 Jójárt 2024.

about a favourable resolution to the conflict. Professor Karaganov wrote that “the enemy must know that we are ready to deliver a pre-emptive strike in retaliation for all of its current and past acts of aggression in order to prevent a slide into global thermonuclear war.”³⁸ This idea has sparked significant debate and controversy both domestically and internationally and has also impacted arms control discussions.

In line with Professor Karaganov’s proposal, Dmitry Trenin, a Research Professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, stressed that the conflict in Ukraine is intensifying both horizontally, through the expansion of the geographical scope of the war, and vertically, by escalating the power and intensity of the weapons used. He warned that if this trend continues unchecked, it could lead to a direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO. He predicted that such a clash would not only engulf Europe in war but could also escalate to a nuclear level, with potential exchanges of nuclear strikes between Russia and the United States.³⁹

Meanwhile, many Russian and American scholars expressed doubts and rejected the above-mentioned ideas. Professor at MGIMO University Ivan Timofeev argues that the scenario described in Professor Karaganov’s prompt suggests a strategic move that involves a rapid escalation to force significant changes in the West’s approach and policies towards Russia. This would serve as a tool to shock Western powers into accepting a new status quo in Ukraine. Despite its apparent rationale, the adoption of this approach would pose significant risks for several reasons. Firstly, it overlooks and fails to recognise the determination of Western elites to engage in a potential escalation with Russia, possibly even leading the charge and challenging attempts at de-escalation. Secondly, it overestimates the likelihood of other countries, particularly China and other nuclear and/or regional powers, accepting a Russian nuclear strike, which could have severe implications for global stability and other countries’ interests. Thirdly, it fails to consider the catastrophic aftermath that Russia itself would face if such a strategy were pursued. The potential nuclear fallout on Russian soil and its standing in the international community could be devastating.⁴⁰

Other Russian experts, including Alexey Arbatov, Konstantin Bogdanov, and Dmitry Stefanovich from the International Security Centre of the IMEMO Institute of International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences highlighted that nuclear weapons remain the dirtiest of all WMDs in terms of their destructive properties. The view that the use of nuclear weapons can stop escalation and solve strategic problems that conventional military forces have failed to resolve is highly questionable and most likely erroneous. A nuclear strike would raise the conflict to a fundamentally different level of unpredictability and multiply the stakes of the confrontation. Escalation by stages of air and space strikes and nuclear attacks would quickly bring the conflict to an exchange of massive blows. The consequences would be nothing short of a global catastrophe and the destruction of modern civilisation.⁴¹

38 Караганов 2023.

39 Trenin 2023.

40 Timofeev 2023.

41 Арбатов, Богданов, Стефанович 2023.

Moreover, President Putin seems also to be against such a scenario by stressing that nuclear weapons intend to ensure Russia's security, and that there is no immediate requirement or necessity to employ them. The mere act of debating the use of nuclear weapons serves to elevate the threshold for their utilisation.⁴²

Western experts also reacted to Professor Karaganov's essay. They emphasised that the use of tactical nuclear weapons in conflicts like the one in Ukraine poses significant risks due to the potential for uncontrollable escalation and catastrophic consequences. Karaganov's proposal, although not entirely aligned with mainstream strategic thought or policy decisions, underscores the complexity of the situation and the need for all parties involved to consider their actions and strategies carefully. It serves as a reminder to prioritise de-escalation efforts that exclude any possibility of nuclear weapon deployment and make efforts to address nuclear weapon issues at the negotiating table with the help of arms control tools.⁴³

William Alberque, Director of Strategy, Technology and Arms Control at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) shared his insights on Russia's doctrine related to non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW). He writes that Russia would not deploy NSNW in regional conflicts that do not involve external forces, particularly the U.S., because only a direct confrontation would be viewed as a threat to the very existence of the Russian state. However, Russia might use the threat of NSNW or strategic nuclear capabilities if it perceives direct US intervention. This would align with the Russian strategic doctrine on nuclear deterrence. However, the use of nuclear weapons cannot be considered as an automatic response even in such a situation. Russia's military strategy at all operational levels aims to determine the appropriate extent of force necessary to achieve its objectives while mitigating the risk of nuclear retaliation or significant escalation with the United States and its allies.⁴⁴

It is important to note that while Russia has recently deployed non-strategic nuclear weapons to Belarus,⁴⁵ this development does not directly contradict Alberque's assessment, as Belarus itself is not a conflict zone. Instead, the deployment is widely interpreted as part of Russia's broader nuclear signalling strategy linked to the war in Ukraine and its standoff with NATO. By positioning these weapons closer to NATO borders, Russia seeks to enhance deterrence and exert psychological pressure on Western states without breaching its own doctrinal

42 Президент России 2023b.

43 Cimbala, Korb 2023.

44 Alberque 2024, 18.

45 In the spring of 2023, Alexander Lukashenko appealed to the Russian President to deploy Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus because of the increased tension caused by the SMO in Ukraine. Belarus received missiles and warheads from Moscow that were stated to be "three times more powerful" than the ones used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as per Lukashenko's announcement on 13 June 2023. President Putin further acknowledged this significant delivery of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus during his address at the St Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2023. On 25 December 2023, Lukashenko announced that "all Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus are in place and in good condition". In May 2024, the new Belarusian military doctrine was approved by the Belarusian National Assembly, which provides for the role of tactical nuclear weapons in ensuring the country's effective deterrence and security.

thresholds for nuclear use in active regional conflicts. This approach was highlighted in Dmitry Adamsky's paper, which emphasised that non-strategic weapons are part of Russia's cross-domain coercion campaign, involving a comprehensive blend of different types of deterrence and competent tactics, including the combination of non-nuclear, informational, and nuclear elements. The integration of diverse strategies and capabilities to exert influence across multiple domains aims at maximising the impact and effectiveness of Russian foreign policy.⁴⁶

As it can be seen, the SMO in Ukraine and Professor Karaganov's paper have drawn attention to one of the most pressing problems impacting international security – the use of non-strategic nuclear warheads and the absence of a treaty or any transparency measures regarding these capabilities. Historically, bilateral nuclear arms control agreements between the United States and Russia have focused on delivery systems rather than warheads, as delivery systems are easier to monitor, primarily through satellite surveillance. However, the importance of addressing non-strategic nuclear weapons in future agreements is increasing due to the evolving security landscape and changing threat perceptions. NSNW pose unique challenges and risks that require addressing through international agreements.

The elimination of US non-strategic nuclear weapons was on the agenda during President Barack Obama's presidency, whose administration called for a "world free of nuclear weapons" in 2009. The program was formally introduced during Obama's landmark speech in Prague on 5th April 2009, where he outlined both the moral responsibility and practical necessity of reducing nuclear dangers in the 21st century. The president acknowledged that while the goal of complete nuclear disarmament might not be achieved in his lifetime, the United States would take concrete steps toward this vision by reducing the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy, strengthening the global non-proliferation regime, and securing vulnerable nuclear materials worldwide.⁴⁷

The Prague address marked a defining moment in post-Cold War arms control diplomacy, leading to tangible outcomes, including the negotiation of the New START Treaty with Russia in 2010. Obama's initiative also sought to reinforce the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and to host the first Nuclear Security Summit in 2010, with a focus on preventing nuclear terrorism. However, it also opened a debate among NATO governments regarding the United States' intention to remove its remaining stocks of nonstrategic nuclear weapons from Europe. Proponents of the idea claimed that NSNW did no longer served any military purpose in the continent and believed that their removal would demonstrate NATO's commitment to Obama's vision and contribute to reducing tensions between Russia and NATO. Furthermore, some argued that the costs associated with maintaining these weapons were better spent on conventional forces or other priorities.⁴⁸

46 Adamsky 2015.

47 The White House 2009.

48 Harvey 2009.

On the other hand, European nations such as Poland and the Baltic states, which had a more hostile relationship towards Russia, argued against the removal of NSNW, asserting that these weapons served a military purpose as a deterrent against Russia and provided compensation for the absence of NATO troops on their territory. They believed that the presence of NSNW was crucial for maintaining a strategic balance against Russia.

Even though the topic of dismantling American non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe came up, there were no practical steps to realise it. Later, the Biden administration has put forth a new initiative to tackle the NSNW issue. It advocated an engagement with Russia through the Strategic Stability Dialogue to advance discussions toward formal arms control negotiations on the topic. Bonnie Jenkins, former Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, highlighted at the November 2021 NATO Nuclear Policy Symposium that the administration's objective encompasses addressing all categories of nuclear warheads, including non-strategic nuclear weapons, in order to promote transparency, reduce risks of miscalculation or conflict escalation, and work towards enhancing global security through effective arms control measures.⁴⁹

Regarding this issue, William Alberque highlighted that arms control on NSNW requires tackling four fundamental challenges, involving agreeing on clear definitions, providing information security, establishing a solid and reliable verification system, and overcoming the problems posed by disparities in the size of stockpiles.⁵⁰ There can be several approaches to defining non-strategic nuclear warheads. A definition could focus on the type of delivery vehicles or the range of the weapons. However, experts agree that the easiest way to differentiate between strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons within a state's arsenal is by excluding characteristics of strategic nuclear weapons from the definition. The so-called "definition by exclusion" method focuses on isolating those nuclear warheads that are part of a state's active nuclear-weapon stockpile but are not associated with strategic delivery systems and not accounted for under strategic arms control agreements. This approach provides clarity and transparency regarding the types of nuclear weapons. By excluding warheads linked to strategic delivery systems, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles or submarine-launched ballistic missiles, covered by arms control treaties, this method allows for a more focused understanding and categorisation of the remaining warheads that serve different operational purposes.⁵¹

The establishment of a solid and reliable verification system is a vital component of any effective and practical arms control agreement, ensuring compliance with the treaties. These systems are designed to provide transparency, build trust among parties, and verify that states are adhering to their commitments.⁵² They are complex and typically include quotas for inspections or observations, which outline the

49 U.S. Department of State 2021.

50 Alrberque 2022a, 60.

51 Alrberque 2022a, 61.

52 Vignard 2010.

53 United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research 2003.

number of inspections each party is allowed to conduct within a specified time frame. These quotas help to ensure that inspections are conducted in a balanced and fair manner. Parties also must notify each other in advance of their intent to inspect the facilities or locations. This notification process enables the host country to prepare for the inspection and ensures that both parties are informed about the upcoming verification activities. In addition to these routine inspections, challenge inspections may be conducted on short notice to address suspicions of non-compliance or unexpected developments. These surprise inspections help deter violations and enhance the effectiveness of arms control verification systems. After an inspection is completed, the inspecting party must report its findings to the other party involved in the agreement. This reporting mechanism is essential for transparency and accountability, as it allows all parties to assess compliance with the terms of the agreement.⁵³

Agreeing on the establishment of a verification system within a treaty requires considerable efforts from both sides, as the parties' interests may differ. Russia's stance on verification in arms control agreements is characterised by a preference for a minimalistic approach. This means that Moscow insists on including only the measures essential to verifying the provisions of a potential agreement and does not support additional verification for transparency and confidence building purposes.⁵⁴ The United States suggests that on the one hand, the verification regime of a future agreement should likely resemble the current verification regime established under New START and would incorporate its core measures such as National Technical Means (NTM), data exchanges, notifications, and inspections. On the other hand, however, it also indicates that additional techniques and more advanced verification technologies may be necessary to address issues in a future agreement.⁵⁵ In its report on nuclear arms control, the US Government Accountability Office highlighted that the verification of non-strategic nuclear weapons in future treaties with Russia will be challenging for several reasons. Firstly, NSNW have some physical and technical attributes, such as being smaller in size, which poses a challenge when it comes to monitoring these weapons using satellites. Secondly, many Russian NSNW delivery systems are dual-capable, so it is difficult to distinguish between nuclear and conventional warheads during inspections visually.⁵⁶

The problem of disparities in the size of stockpiles could be tackled by limitations on the location of deployment or warhead employment in training exercises, as well as through warhead reduction. Warhead reduction has two main tracks. Firstly, warhead reduction to a level of "proportionate balance" focuses on achieving a balance in terms of proportions rather than absolute numbers. Each side commits to reducing its weapon stockpile by a certain percentage, ensuring that the reduction is proportional, even if the actual number of warheads removed may vary between the parties. For example, if both sides agreed to reduce their non-strategic nuclear warheads total by fifty percent, they would maintain a proportionate

54 Alrberque 2022b, 48–49.

55 United States Governmental Accountability Office 2023, 12–13.

56 United States Governmental Accountability Office 2023.

balance in their arsenals. Secondly, warhead reductions to an “absolute balance” are an option which aims for numerical equivalence between the parties’ warhead stockpiles. It could involve freezing the total number of warheads or specific subsets, such as NSNW versus strategic warheads, active versus inactive warheads, or those deployed regionally versus those stored centrally. Another aspect of this approach could be the elimination of all non-strategic nuclear warheads.⁵⁷

Regarding US-Russian bilateral arms control on NSNW one important issue cannot be overlooked – the involvement of NATO allies in the implementation of an agreement. Fifty percent of the US non-strategic arsenal is deployed in Europe on the territory of NATO member states. During negotiations, the ideas and concerns of allies should be considered, mainly because any inspections on their territories would raise legal issues. In preparation for negotiations with Russia, it is wise to anticipate that all allied nations would require a certain level of agreement or understanding concerning the United States’ approach to implementing on-site inspections. This proactive approach ensures that there is clarity and alignment among all parties involved before entering into discussions with Russia. An agreement with NATO was exemplified during the period of the INF Treaty, when Allies established the Special Consultative Group, which functioned before and during formal negotiations and in the development of implementation agreements, protocols, and verification procedures between the United States and Russia.⁵⁸

Other unresolved issues

Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, tactical nuclear weapons have received a great attention from the public and experts. Apart from the issue of NSNW, two other categories of arms should be mentioned that require further limitations. Firstly, hypersonic weapon systems are still being debated. Victor Mizin, a leading research fellow at the Institute of International Studies of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations proposed an idea suggesting that hypersonic systems developed by the U.S., Russia, and China should not be tested or deployed for delivering nuclear warheads. Instead, these systems could be used solely for conventional weapons to reduce the risk of misinterpretation during a potential conflict. By focusing on conventional capabilities, the risk of a conventional strike being mistaken for a nuclear attack could be minimised.⁵⁹

Secondly, the issue of dual-capable weapons is still unsolved. During the Ukrainian conflict, Russia utilised systems capable of carrying both nuclear and conventional warheads which has raised significant concerns regarding the verification of the presence or absence of nuclear warheads on such missiles in future situations. The occurrence of such weapons in a conventional conflict is notable and underscores the complexities associated with monitoring and controlling dual-capable missile systems. Analysts have suggested that upcoming negotiations should

57 Alberque 2022a, 67.

58 Brown 2022, 71–73.

59 Mizin, Yuan 2022, 16.

prioritise limiting or eradicating nuclear-armed dual-purpose cruise missiles while excluding those variants specifically designated for conventional missions. However, it is unknown to what extent Russia would be willing to engage in a dialogue aiming at limiting dual-purpose systems since Russia's large dual-capable missile stockpile serves as an effective deterrent mechanism in the country's nuclear posture. These weapons are closely linked to the concept of entanglement, wherein the intentional ambiguity surrounding the nature of deployed missiles itself serves as a deterrence mechanism. By maintaining this level of uncertainty regarding the armament of its missile systems, Russia aims to enhance its strategic leverage and complicate adversaries' decision-making processes.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Arms reduction and limitation measures underpin the concept of nuclear deterrence by reinforcing stability, deterring aggression, minimising the likelihood of conflict escalation, and mitigating the risks associated with first-strike scenarios. Regardless of changes in global dynamics, the re-establishment of a robust framework for arms control remains crucial for preventing a potential collapse of international security. Moreover, well-crafted treaties that have demonstrated their effectiveness are among the most important methods of safeguarding national security. While not everything may be fully disclosed, treaties play a crucial role in fostering a sense of awareness regarding the surrounding geopolitical landscape.

As it can be seen, the United States and Russia hold significantly different perspectives on the timing and objectives of arms control in the present strategic landscape. The Trump Administration suggested "denuclearization" and the inclusion of China, while Russia considers the restart of dialogue untimely. Furthermore, recent stances taken by Russian officials in 2024 frame arms control as a zero-sum game, where one side's gain is perceived as the other's loss. Moscow appears to be approaching arms control discussions with a more competitive and confrontational mindset, continuing to link them to geopolitics. It wants the U.S. to acknowledge its security concerns and show visible commitment to engaging in constructive dialogue on them. Otherwise, it is unlikely that any significant progress can be made on arms control or strategic stability discussions with Russia.

This approach can undermine the cooperative spirit that is essential for successful arms control agreements. According to the US perspective, by linking future strategic arms control talks to unrelated geopolitical issues, such as American support for Ukraine, this raises concerns about Russia's willingness to prioritise broader security considerations over its immediate political objectives. Moreover, Russia's current nuclear deterrence posture also affects the future of nuclear arms control. The war in Ukraine resulted in significant losses for Russian conventional capabilities, solidifying the United States and NATO's advantage in conventional arsenals. A recent Ukrainian drone attack in June 2025 (Operation Spiderweb)

⁶⁰ Alberque 2023.

reportedly damaged around 10% of Russia's strategic bomber fleet, representing a significant setback for Moscow's nuclear delivery potential, as well. Consequently, Moscow has further shifted its focus towards prioritising nuclear capabilities in its deterrence strategy, which can affect its approach toward arms control. Therefore, the issue has become even more intricate.

In conclusion, effective arms control necessitates mutual benefits for all parties involved. Even without amicable diplomatic ties, if each side perceives that their security and interests are better served through arms control measures, there is still potential for progress. The evolving landscape of international relations underscores the importance of adaptability and creativity in pursuing arms control objectives. The initial steps necessary to restart negotiations should primarily involve reaching a ceasefire agreement in Ukraine, returning to compliance with the New START treaty, and resuming the discussions on a new strategic stability agreement, potentially within the framework of the Strategic Stability Dialogue.

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