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The End of New START — What the Nuclear Arms Control Vacuum Means for Global Security and India

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 MAINS RELEVANCE: **GS Paper 2**


INTERVIEW ANGLE

"The New START treaty has expired with no successor agreement. For a country like India that is not party to the NPT and has its own nuclear deterrent, what does the collapse of the US-Russia arms control architecture mean — and what role, if any, should India play in nuclear risk reduction?"

WHY IN NEWS

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the last legally binding nuclear arms limitation agreement between the United States and Russia, expired on February 5, 2026 without a successor treaty — marking the first time since 1972 that no legal ceiling exists on US and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals.

WHY NEW START MATTERED

The **nuclear arms race** of the Cold War built US and Soviet arsenals to approximately 30,000–40,000 nuclear warheads each at peak (late 1980s). The extraordinary achievement of the arms control era (1972–2026) was to bring these numbers down by over 90% through successive treaties: SALT I (1972), SALT II (1979, never ratified), INF Treaty (1987, abolished ground-launched intermediate-range missiles), START I (1991, expired 2009), SORT/Moscow Treaty (2002), and finally New START (2010).

New START's specific contributions:

Verification: It maintained an intrusive inspection regime — on-site inspections of missile silos, bomber bases, and storage facilities — allowing both sides to verify the other's compliance with agreed limits

Predictability: Even if both sides were aware each was maintaining “enough” weapons for deterrence, the treaty provided transparency about exactly how many, and of what type, preventing miscalculation

Signal: A functioning arms control treaty signalled that nuclear weapons were being managed as a responsibility, not just an asset

Without New START, both sides can: increase deployed warhead numbers without legal constraint, develop and deploy new delivery systems without disclosure, and stop the intrusive inspections that were the most reliable source of mutual confidence about nuclear postures.

HOW WE GOT HERE — THE UNRAVELING

The collapse of New START was not sudden. It followed a decade of erosion in the broader arms control architecture:

2018: Russia deployed the SSC-8 cruise missile, which the US claimed violated the **INF Treaty**. Russia denied the violation. The Trump Administration withdrew from the INF Treaty in **August 2019**, followed by Russia.

2019: The US withdrew from the **Open Skies Treaty** (2020); Russia followed in 2021. This treaty had allowed unarmed reconnaissance flights over each other's territory — a crucial transparency tool.

2021: Russia suspended **New START inspections** (citing COVID), which were never resumed. The Biden Administration negotiated a 5-year extension of New START in February 2021 (to 2026), buying time for follow-on negotiations — but those negotiations never produced an agreement.

February 2023: Russia formally **suspended its participation** in New START, citing Western military support for Ukraine and NATO nations' involvement in the conflict. Russia did not “withdraw” from the treaty (which would have required notification) but “suspended” its obligations — a legally ambiguous status.

February 5, 2026: New START's final expiry date arrives with no successor, no negotiations in progress, and a US-Russia relationship at its lowest point since the Cold War.

THE NEW NUCLEAR LANDSCAPE — WHAT CHANGES

Russia's posture: Russia has **~5,580 total nuclear warheads** (of which ~1,500 deployed strategic warheads as of 2024 SIPRI data). Without New START constraints, Russia could increase deployed warheads. More importantly, Russia has invested heavily in new delivery systems — the **Sarmat ICBM** (Satan 2), **Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle**, **Kinzhal air-launched hypersonic missile**, and **Poseidon nuclear underwater drone** — all of which have no treaty regulation.

US posture: The US has **~5,550 total nuclear warheads** (of which ~1,700 deployed strategic). The Biden/early Trump administrations committed to **nuclear modernisation** programmes costing ~USD 1.7 trillion over 30 years — new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines, B-21 Raider bombers, and Sentinel ICBM replacements.

China factor — The Missing Third Party: A fundamental limitation of New START was that it was **bilateral** — China was not a party. China’s nuclear arsenal has been growing (estimated at ~500 warheads in 2024, up from ~350 in 2020, likely heading to 1,000+ by 2035). The US and Russia have argued that any successor agreement must include China; China has refused, arguing its much smaller arsenal warrants no equivalent restrictions. This trilateral impasse is the core obstacle to any successor framework.

INDIA’S INTEREST — NON-NPT NUCLEAR STATE IN A RISKIER WORLD

India occupies a unique position: a **de facto nuclear weapons state** (testing in 1974 — Pokhran I, and 1998 — Pokhran II/Shakti) that is not a signatory to the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**. India has consistently argued the NPT is discriminatory because it grandfathers the five P5 nuclear states (USA, Russia, China, UK, France) while denying nuclear weapons rights to others.

The New START expiry affects India in several ways:

First, the precedent effect: If the world’s two largest nuclear powers cannot maintain even a basic arms limitation regime, it strengthens the hand of proliferators and undermines India’s own advocacy for **universal disarmament** (a stated Indian nuclear policy goal). India’s moral authority in multilateral forums depends in part on the P5 fulfilling their Article VI NPT obligations (to pursue disarmament in good faith).

Second, China’s unconstrained arsenal: India’s nuclear doctrine responds primarily to Pakistan (short-range deterrence via Prithvi/Agni-I) and China (intermediate/longer range via Agni-III/IV/V). China’s growing arsenal — with no treaty restraint — directly affects India’s minimum credible deterrence calculations.

Third, nuclear risk in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and China are engaged in a **regional nuclear triangle** with no arms control architecture. India’s moratorium on nuclear testing (since 1998) is voluntary; Pakistan’s is reciprocal but unverified; China has more weaponry than either. The New START model of bilateral verification is simply not present in South Asia.

India’s policy position: India supports a **Nuclear Weapons Convention** — a global, verifiable treaty eliminating all nuclear weapons — in principle, while maintaining a deterrent as long as others do. India also supports **Negative Security Assurances (NSAs)** — guarantees from nuclear-weapon states not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. The New START collapse weakens the overall architecture within which NSAs derive legitimacy.

UPSC RELEVANCE

New START (signed April 2010; in force February 2011; expired February 5, 2026; limits: 1,550 warheads / 700 delivery vehicles / 800 launchers); INF Treaty (signed 1987; US withdrew August 2019); Open Skies Treaty (US withdrew 2020; Russia 2021); India nuclear tests: Pokhran I (1974, “Smiling Buddha”) and Pokhran II (1998, “Shakti” — 5 tests); NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — India not a signatory); CTBT (India supports moratorium, not ratified); Russia nuclear warheads (~5,580 total); US nuclear warheads (~5,550 total); China nuclear warheads (~500, growing to 1,000+); Sarmat ICBM (Russia); Avangard hypersonic (Russia).

Nuclear non-proliferation architecture; arms control treaties timeline; India’s nuclear doctrine; India’s position on NPT and disarmament; Nuclear Command Authority; nuclear risk in South Asia; China’s growing arsenal and India’s response; Negative Security Assurances.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

NEW START — SPECIFIC DATA:

Full name: New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty

Signed: **April 8, 2010** (Prague)

In force: **February 5, 2011**

Expired: **February 5, 2026** (no successor)

5-year extension signed: **February 2021** (Biden-Putin)

Russia suspended: **February 2023** (Ukraine context)

Limits: **1,550 deployed warheads / 700 deployed delivery vehicles / 800 total launchers**

Verification: On-site inspections (18 per year per side)

NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL TIMELINE:

1972: SALT I — first US-Soviet arms limitation agreement

1987: INF Treaty — eliminated ground-launched intermediate-range missiles (500–5,500 km)

1991: START I — first binding reductions (90% from Cold War peaks over 7 years)

2002: SORT/Moscow Treaty — loose warhead limits

2010: New START — strict inspection regime + 1,550 warhead limit

2019: US withdrew from INF Treaty (Russia compliance violations alleged)

2021: Open Skies Treaty abandoned by USA and Russia

2026: New START expired — no legal framework for first time since 1972

GLOBAL NUCLEAR ARSENALS (2024 ESTIMATES, SIPRI):

Russia: ~**5,580** total (1,500 deployed strategic)

USA: ~**5,550** total (1,700 deployed strategic)

China: ~**500** total (growing rapidly; no treaty constraints)

France: ~290; UK: ~225; Pakistan: ~170; India: ~172; Israel: ~90; North Korea: ~50

US + Russia: **87% of global nuclear warheads**

INDIA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME:

Pokhran I: **May 18, 1974** (“Smiling Buddha”) — first test; classified as “peaceful nuclear explosion”

Pokhran II: **May 11–13, 1998** (5 tests, “Operation Shakti”) — established India as de facto nuclear state

Draft Nuclear Doctrine: **1999**; formalised January **2003**

No First Use (NFU): India's stated policy (will not use nuclear weapons first)

Nuclear Command Authority: Political Council (PM) + Executive Council (NSA)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

China's refusal to join arms control talks: Argues its ~500 warheads vs US/Russia ~5,500 makes equal constraints unjust

Hypersonic weapons (Russia's Avangard, Kinzhal; US developing): Travel at Mach 5+, manoeuvre in flight, hard to intercept — not covered by any treaty

Article VI (NPT): Requires nuclear-weapon states to pursue disarmament in good faith — Russia and USA repeatedly cited for non-compliance

Negative Security Assurances (NSA): Pledges not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states; India, Pakistan seek binding NSAs from P5

Sources: Indian Express, Drishti IAS

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