20 November 2025

Nuclear arms control: is the current demise reversible?

Sergey Batsanov served as USSR, then Russian Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva after working on arms control, non-proliferation, outer space and nuclear energy issues in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 14 years. He was later a senior member of the secretariat of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in the Hague and is now with a Geneva-based NGO dealing with key issues of global stability and conflict.

****

Question: How would you characterise the current state of treaty-based nuclear arms control and non-proliferation?

Answer: A short answer might well be that it is in the state of demise. But when I look at the big picture, my impression is that the world today is traveling through a zone of intense and multidimensional turbulence, which includes the re-distribution of economic, political and military power, unprecedented technological revolution, the erosion of legal norms and an over-abundance of double standards. The barriers against the use of force are being lowered, and treaties concluded in an earlier age are more and more often seen by some states (not by all, obviously) as limiting their survival strategies.

Furthermore, one should not ignore fundamental socio-economic changes in many societies, leading to the evaporation of middle classes, which in turn is putting at risk democratic norms of behaviour - both within countries and among them, and producing intellectual pauperisation of ruling elites, who are losing their potential for responsible governance.

Question: During the Cold War, the nuclear order was largely bipolar, shaped primarily by the U.S and the Soviet Union. Today we see a shift toward multipolarity, with China expanding its arsenal, and India and Pakistan modernizing theirs. In this evolving environment, do you believe strategic stability can still be managed mainly through U.S.–Russia frameworks?

Answer: The shift towards multipolarity is a complex process, not limited to nuclear weapons. But as it does affect nuclear issues, some adaptation of earlier concepts would be in order. That said, it would be a mistake to concentrate primarily on China, then on India and Pakistan, while leaving aside the U.K. and France, as if they are not increasing and modernizing their nuclear arsenals and not planning to provide a nuclear umbrella to some other European countries, which can be quite destabilizing. It would also be a mistake to ignore the fact that for the foreseeable future the U.S. and Russia are likely to remain the biggest nuclear powers.

With the shift towards multipolarity, the old perceptions of nuclear deterrence, balance and nuclear risk reduction may need adjustments. With multipolarity there could be more situations in which one or another country, which so far appeared to be immune to nuclear proliferation, may start thinking differently.

What is worse, national security is being increasingly seen as a non-cooperative, competitive, antagonistic and adversarial enterprise. This is very disquieting, and while it is premature today to start negotiations on strategic stability, it is high time to start thinking about new models of security in a multipolar world, without forgetting useful old approaches, such as inclusiveness, mutuality, respect for each other's sovereignty and avoidance of a zero-sum mentality.

Question: The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which entered into force for ten years in 2011 and was extended in 2021, is due to expire in February 2026. Do you see any prospect of a further extension or of Russia and the U.S. agreeing on a successor treaty?

Answer: I am afraid, we have to recognise that the time remaining before the expiration of New Start is not sufficient to negotiate a replacement treaty; moreover, the current state of U.S.-Russian relations simply rules that out. A further extension of the treaty is not envisaged in the treaty text, and even if some magical legal formula is found to make such an extension possible, it would still need to go through ratification procedures in each country, and that, under current circumstances, would doom extension to failure.

Yet, it would be wrong not to try to salvage at least some positive elements of nuclear arms control that still remain today. This is important for the longer-term future, but also in view of some imminent events, such as the next NPT Review Conference in April-May 2026. It seems that the latest Russian proposal (September 22, 2025) - to observe the main quantitative limits under the treaty for another year, subject to certain conditions, and, possibly, longer - offers a chance for progress. I hope Washington can respond positively to that initiative.

Question: Russia responded to U.S. withdrawal from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with a withdrawal of its own. How does this affect global peace and security?

Answer: In fact, what killed the INF Treaty was the U.S. withdrawal; it was enough to invalidate the treaty and there was no need for Russia to withdraw even if it had wanted to, which it did not. On the contrary, Russia declared a unilateral moratorium on deployment of intermediate and shorter-range missiles and promised to keep it as long as there were no missiles of this type being deployed by the U.S. It is this moratorium that was terminated about three months ago because of U.S. deployments, actual and planned.

That said, the impact of the treaty's demise is profoundly negative. A norm having disappeared, the proliferation of such missiles to new regions and countries (including non-nuclear-weapon states) is a very real risk now. Some of these missiles, even with conventional warheads, can be used in counterforce strikes against nuclear-weapon states thus jeopardizing strategic balances and heightening the risks of nuclear weapon use.

Question: The U.S. also withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, in 2002. Is the loss of that Cold War treaty significant for nuclear arms control and strategic balance?

Answer: This was not just a Cold War treaty. It was a cornerstone of strategic stability and a basis for the limitation and reduction of strategic offensive forces. It provided a guarantee, that carefully calculated balances and limits would not be suddenly devalued by the increased capability of one or another party to nullify the other party`s potential to deliver a retaliatory second strike.

The absence of such a treaty has proven to be an **incentive** for a qualitative and quantitative build-up of offensive nuclear forces, development of modern missiles, capable of avoiding ballistic missile defence systems, including exotic systems designed to guarantee a second strike "success". And while the most significant destabilising consequences of anti-missile defense are

to be found in the U.S.-Russia strategic relationship, the same negative consequences, perhaps in some modified form, can manifest themselves on a much broader scale by influencing China`s strategic programmes, for example.

Question: China is expanding its nuclear force, from the low hundreds to one thousand or more warheads. What is motivating this expansion, in your view?

Answer: It is not easy for me to give an exhaustive and balanced answer, but the demise of the ABM Treaty is the first factor that comes to mind. In view of China's ability to deliver a second strike against the U.S. having for long been much lower than that of the U.S.S.R./Russia, the development of a more or less effective U.S. ABM system would present a more serious threat to China than to Russia. Add to this the current U.S. policy of deploying long-range precision guided missiles in the Pacific and selling such systems to key allies in the areas surrounding China (Australia being a good example).

Question: Some non-nuclear states are now investing in long-range conventional missiles as a means of deterrence. Do you see this as a stabilizing alternative to nuclear deterrence, or are these developments likely to further destabilize global security by blurring the line between conventional and strategic warfare?

Answer: My concern is that the proliferation of conventional precision strike capabilities is likely to have destabilizing effects, especially if such capabilities have a strategic counterforce potential: namely that they can be used effectively against strategic nuclear forces and related assets. Successful attacks using such weapons can deplete to some degree a target's strategic deterrence capabilities and in certain situations could stimulate a retaliatory nuclear strike.

The situation can become even less predictable and more unstable if a non-nuclear-weapon state, executing such an attack, is acting in cooperation with or with support from a nuclear-weapon state, with the latter providing assistance in reconnaissance, targeting or flight control. Such situations may result in a lowering of the nuclear threshold and in an increased risk of nuclear war.

Even in time of peace this trend will be creating additional difficulties for negotiating nuclear arms control and nuclear arms reduction measures, including by rendering more difficult the calculation of the balance between or among respective nuclear forces.

To conclude, is the demise of nuclear arms control reversible? Yes, I believe so, but it will take a lot of effort on all sides.

****