

Nuclear chessboard

Rising tests, expanding arsenals, eroding restraint


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OPINION

Perhaps the most alarming development amidst the swirl of wars and crises, be it Ukraine and Russia, Gaza and Israel, Iran and Israel, India and Pakistan, Thailand and Cambodia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and Sudan, is the reinsertion of the nuclear weapon factor in global concerns. Since the launch of its attack on Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly brandished the nuclear threat to warn off the West. More recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin boasted of successful tests of a new nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed Burevestnik missile, as well as of a nuclear-weapon-armed Poseidon underwater drone. Shortly thereafter, United States President Donald Trump announced that his country had decided to renew testing of nuclear weapons, which is a decision that could end a moratorium that has lasted over 30 years. Days later, Putin said that if the US resumed testing, Russia, too, would follow suit. The US has observed a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing since 1992, though it has maintained the ability to resume the tests. What Trump meant by this announcement remains ambiguous. Specialists say that four different types of activities could be on the table. The first is a straightforward explosive test, which would result in a seismic yield and can be easily detected by the global network of seismic stations. The second is a super-critical test in which a self-sustaining chain reaction is created, but may not yield a seismic result. A third is a subcritical test, which is conducted routinely, in which nuclear powers ensure the reliability of their arsenals through lasers and supercomputers, such as those the US has in its National Ignition Facility and China has at its Mianyang facility. The fourth is, of course, the testing of nuclear delivery systems. The United States has accused China and Russia of conducting “supercritical” hydronuclear tests, which it argues would violate the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) because such tests involve a self-sustaining fission chain reaction and therefore constitute nuclear explosions under the treaty’s defi-



● BARBARA GIBSON/NEW STATESMAN

nition. The CTBT has been signed by 187 states and ratified by 178, but it has not entered into force because several of the 44 Annex-II states required for entry into force — including India, Pakistan, and North Korea, none of which have signed the treaty — have not completed the necessary ratification procedures.

Expanding Chinese arsenal
Nevertheless, other issues are crowding the nuclear table. Since 2020, China allegedly has more than doubled its nuclear arsenal to around 600 warheads and is adding roughly 100 warheads each year. By the beginning of 2025, China had more or less completed 350 new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) silos in three large fields in the northern desert part of the country and three in the mountainous areas of the east. There are nearly as many silos as in the US. The Chinese have so far not acknowledged these changes, but they have spoken of the need for a “strategic counterbalance”.

Both allies, adversaries on edge
Another issue comprises nervous allies spooked by the Trump administration’s unclear alliance policy, with a president who may now be contemplating crossing the nuclear threshold. Among these could be counted countries such as South Korea, Japan, Poland, and Germany. Iran is recovering from the destruction of its nuclear facilities and is no doubt contemplating continuing its programme.

Ukraine’s plight is bound to focus minds. The country gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for guarantees from the five declared nuclear-weapon powers. The guarantors agreed not to use military force or coercion against countries like Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, which surrendered their nuclear weapons in 1994 following the dissolution of the erstwhile Soviet Union. Though the US and Russia have a total inventory of over 5,000 and a deployed inventory of 1,700 nuclear weapons each, they were essentially intended to be used against each other in the event of a nuclear war. However, the US is now confronting the growth of the Chinese arsenal and deliberating whether its own arsenal is expansive enough. Concurrently, it also has to worry about new Russian delivery systems. A Congressional Commission recommended in 2023 that the US expand its nuclear arsenal because of the Chinese buildup. As of now, both Russia and the United States continue to abide by the New START Treaty, which expires in February 2026. Given the recent dismal record of arms-control agreements, there is little hope that the treaty will be renewed. China, for its part, has made clear that it is not interested in arms-control negotiations as it seeks to catch up with the nuclear capabilities of Russia and the United States.

Islamabad’s command shake-up
Yet another development bears concerns for India. This is the

passage of the 27th constitutional amendment in Pakistan, which has given exclusive control of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal to Field Marshal Asim Munir. The Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) was created in 2000, headed by the prime minister, and comprised the three service chiefs and the chairman of the Chief of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCS). Now, the office of the CJCS has been abolished. Asim Munir is not only the army chief but also, in his new role as Chief of Defence Forces (CDF), outranks the other service chiefs and will recommend the commander to lead Pakistan’s newly created National Strategic Command, which has replaced the NCA. In essence, this arrangement concentrates the authority over nuclear use in a single unelected leader. As is well known, Pakistani nuclear weapons are “India-centric”. Islamabad has adopted a “first use” doctrine which it says caters to “full spectrum deterrence” using strategic and tactical nuclear weapons for a range of contingencies — such as the loss of significant territory in a war with India, destruction of a large portion of its land or air forces, the strangulation of its economy, or the destabilisation of the Pakistani political system.

Golden Dome gamble
At Trump’s instance, the US is working on the Golden Dome missile defence project that would include space-based sensors and attack satellites. How-

ever, specialists argue that this could actually give a fillip to a new arms race. The threat of mutual destruction has held the nuclear peace since the beginning of the nuclear age. The effort to create a shield could negate this logic as adversaries will try to circumvent or defeat the new capabilities. This could involve new and more missiles, decoys, and delivery systems, such as underwater autonomous torpedoes, much like the Poseidon.

Arms control in crisis
Earlier this month, Trump said that he was “working on a plan to denuclearize” with China, Russia, and the US. This was a passing reference, and only a few details are known. The problem is that at this stage, arms control efforts have not just ground to a halt, but there has been a steady demise of treaties once signed between the US and Russia. Trump has been speaking of nuclear talks for quite some time. In 2020, he tried and failed to launch three-way talks involving China, Russia, and the US. Shortly after becoming president, he told the World Economic Forum that vast amounts of money were being spent on the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons, and no one wanted to talk about it. “So we want to see if we can denuclearize, and I think that’s very possible.” Russia’s immediate response was that it wanted to resume arms control talks as soon as possible. Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, said that such negotiations were in the interests of the world and both countries, but he added that the ball was in America’s court. However, the Chinese have been quite categorical that they will not participate in any denuclearisation efforts. The Chinese spokeswoman Mao Ning said in response to a question following Trump’s denuclearisation claim that “China’s nuclear forces are not on the same scale as those of the US and Russia; it would be unfair, unreasonable, and impractical at this stage to require China to join nuclear arms control talks.” Clearly, in the current political climate, the prospects for arms talks are dim, while momentum appears to favour forces that are stoking a new arms race.

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Treaty name	Status 2025	Notes
INF Treaty	Dead	Both the US and Russia withdrew in 2019
CFE Treaty	Dead	Russia withdrew (Nov 2023). North Atlantic Treaty Organization suspended its obligations
Open Skies Treaty	Dead	Both the US and Russia withdrew in 2020-21
ABM Treaty	Dead	The US withdrew in 2002
New START	Suspended (by Russia)	Russia suspended in Feb 2023, not withdrawn. But the treaty expires in February 2026
CTBT	De-ratified (Russia)	Russia did so, citing the US’s lack of ratification
Vienna Document	Dead/Not functional	Russia stopped cooperation in March 2023

▲ Status of arms control agreements as of December 02, 2025
● MANOJ JOSHI/ORF



▲ The illustration published by the largest US defense contractor, Lockheed Martin, loosely imagines how Donald Trump’s boasted Golden Dome project will operate to shield the United States from missiles via satellites shooting lasers.
● CNN