

AN UNNOTICED CRISIS

The End of History for Nuclear Arms Control?

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Beginning with the signing of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963, an international arms control regime has limited existing nuclear arsenals and prevented further proliferation of nuclear weapons. But that entire system could soon unravel. Nearly all negotiations on nuclear arms reduction and nonproliferation have come to a stop, while existing treaty structures are eroding due to political and military-technological developments and may collapse in the near future. These strategic and technical problems can be resolved if politicians are willing to work them out, and if experts approach them creatively.

A Steady Erosion

- Problems other than nuclear arms control dominate the security agenda of the polycentric world.
- Political momentum facilitated negotiations and agreements between Russia and the United States in the 1990s and during a brief reset period between 2009 and 2011. But renewed confrontation and curtailed cooperation between the two countries since then have undermined progress.
- With the disintegration of the nuclear arms control regime, threats of and plans for the combat use of nuclear forces will return to the strategic and political environment.
- Mutual mistrust, suspicion, and misunderstanding among nuclear states will also increase, which may lead to a fatal error in a crisis, with grave consequences.

What World Powers Can Do To Revive Nuclear Arms Control

Forge a unified position. Only political unity among the major global powers and alliances, coupled with urgent and effective action, can reverse the trend of disintegration and help to avoid the “end of history” of nuclear arms control.

Preserve existing treaties. The 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty should remain in effect to limit offensive nuclear weapons.

Set new goals. Because total nuclear disarmament is a distant aim, the parties’ immediate goals should be less ambitious and more suited to the existing—and far from ideal—world order.

Explore a range of options and angles. Objectives could include achieving the next step in reducing the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals on a bilateral basis after 2020, unconditionally committing to a no-first-use policy for nuclear weapons, mutually lowering the alert levels for all legs of strategic forces in a verifiable manner, and transforming the bilateral arms control process into a multilateral one.

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