



Research Article

Evolution of Nuclear Arms Control Regimes Since 1970: Treaties, Compliance, And Strategic Stability

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Abstract

Since the entry into force of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970, nuclear arms control has undergone several distinct phases, from superpower détente and deep bilateral reductions to contemporary uncertainties marked by treaty erosion and multipolar competition. This paper analyses the evolution of nuclear arms control regimes from 1970 to the mid-2020s with a focus on three dimensions: the development of key multilateral and bilateral treaties, the design and practice of verification and compliance mechanisms, and the implications of these regimes for strategic stability. Using a qualitative historical-institutionalist approach and drawing on primary treaty texts, policy documents, and secondary scholarly literature, the study traces the trajectory of major agreements such as the NPT, Strategic Arms Limitation and Reduction Treaties (SALT/START), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW). The analysis finds that arms control contributed significantly to reducing deployed strategic arsenals, enhancing transparency, and lowering the risk of inadvertent escalation during the late Cold War and early post-Cold War periods, but that this architecture has come under strain from recurring allegations of non-compliance, the collapse of several cornerstone agreements, and the entrance of new nuclear actors and technologies. The paper argues that future strategic stability will depend on adapting arms control to a more complex multipolar and technological environment, strengthening verification and compliance institutions, and finding inclusive frameworks that integrate both nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of nuclear weapons transformed the nature of warfare and posed unprecedented risks for global security, prompting early efforts to limit testing, deployment, and proliferation. By 1970, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) had entered into force, laying the foundation for a complex regime of treaties, institutions, and informal practices aimed at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons while facilitating peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

From the 1970s through the early 1990s, nuclear arms control was largely defined by bilateral U.S.–Soviet agreements that imposed numerical limits, constrained certain categories of delivery systems, and established unprecedented verification arrangements. Subsequently, the end of the Cold War brought both opportunities for deeper reductions and new challenges, including the breakup of the Soviet Union, regional proliferation crises, and the rise of non-state actors. In the 21st century, arms control has confronted renewed great-power competition, emerging technologies such as hypersonic systems and cyber-warfare, and the collapse or weakening of several core treaties, raising concerns about the future of strategic stability.

This paper addresses three interrelated research questions: (1) How have nuclear arms control regimes evolved since 1970 in terms of their legal instruments and institutional architecture? (2) How have verification and compliance mechanisms developed within these regimes, and how effective have they been? (3) In what ways have these regimes contributed to or undermined strategic stability across different historical periods? By answering these questions, the study seeks to contribute to theoretical and policy debates on the role of arms control in a changing nuclear order.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Nuclear Arms Control and Strategic Stability

Arms control is commonly understood as the limitation, reduction, or regulation of military capabilities through negotiated agreements, confidence-building measures, and verification arrangements. In the nuclear domain, arms control aims to reduce the probability, destructiveness, and unpredictability of nuclear war, while maintaining or enhancing deterrence stability among key actors. Strategic stability, in turn, refers to conditions under which no state perceives a rational incentive to launch a first nuclear strike or to escalate a crisis to the nuclear level, typically because of secure second-strike capabilities and predictable mutual deterrence relationships.

This paper distinguishes three dimensions of strategic stability affected by arms control: (1) crisis stability, or the absence of incentives to pre-empt during a confrontation; (2) arms race stability, or the absence of strong incentives for rapid, competitive buildup; and (3) normative-institutional stability, or the robustness of legal and political norms constraining nuclear behaviour. Treaties that cap arsenals, restrict destabilising systems, and increase transparency may enhance all three dimensions, while erosion of regimes may have the opposite effect.

B. Regimes, Institutions, and Compliance

International regimes are defined as sets of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue area. Nuclear arms control regimes include formal treaties, supporting organisations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and informal arrangements that guide state behaviour. Compliance and verification are central concerns for regime effectiveness; verification systems must be capable of detecting significant violations with high confidence, while enforcement mechanisms must deter non-compliance and reassure compliant states.

Verification mechanisms range from national technical means (such as satellites) and data exchanges to on-site inspections, continuous monitoring, and remote sensing technologies. Over time, nuclear arms control has seen a progression from minimal verification provisions to sophisticated, multi-layered systems, particularly in U.S.–Soviet/Russian agreements and IAEA safeguards. Yet persistent compliance controversies, including clandestine nuclear programs and alleged treaty violations, underscore enduring limitations.

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a qualitative, historical-institutionalist methodology that traces the development of nuclear arms control regimes from 1970 to the mid-2020s. The analysis synthesises primary sources, including treaty texts, official government reports, and international organisation documents, with peer-reviewed scholarly literature and policy analyses from research institutes.

The study is organised chronologically into three broad periods: (1) the era of détente and early institutionalisation (1970s–mid-1980s); (2) deep reductions and post-Cold War transformations (late 1980s–2000s); and (3) erosion and adaptation in a multipolar nuclear environment (2010s–mid-2020s). Within each period, key treaties and initiatives are assessed in terms of their objectives, verification and compliance provisions, and contributions to strategic stability. While the study does not employ quantitative modelling, it incorporates comparative tables to systematically present treaty attributes and state behaviour.

EVOLUTION OF NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL REGIMES SINCE 1970

A. The NPT and the Foundations of Non-Proliferation

The NPT, opened for signature in 1968 and entered into force in 1970, has become the central pillar of the global nuclear order. It rests on three interlinked “pillars”: non-proliferation commitments by non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS), disarmament obligations by nuclear-weapon states (NWS), and the promotion of peaceful uses of nuclear energy under safeguards. As of the early 2020s, the vast majority of UN member states are parties, with a small number of notable outliers including India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea (which announced its withdrawal in 2003).

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) implements safeguards agreements under Article III of the NPT to verify

that NNWS do not divert nuclear material from peaceful to weapons purposes. Over time, safeguards have evolved from “INFCIRC/153-type” comprehensive agreements to include the Additional Protocol, which grants the IAEA expanded access and information rights to detect undeclared nuclear activities. Although the NPT has not prevented all proliferation, it is widely credited with slowing the spread of nuclear weapons and creating a normative expectation against acquisition.

B. Bilateral Superpower Arms Control: SALT, ABM, and INF

The 1970s marked the beginning of formal U.S.–Soviet strategic arms control through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. SALT I (1972) capped the number of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers, while the ABM Treaty limited national missile defence systems to maintain mutual vulnerability and stabilise deterrence. SALT II (1979), although never ratified by the U.S. Senate, was largely observed for several years and imposed further limits on strategic delivery vehicles.

In 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty eliminated all U.S. and Soviet ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres, along with associated launchers. The INF Treaty was notable for its intrusive verification regime, including on-site inspections and continuous monitoring at certain facilities, which helped build confidence in compliance and set precedents for later agreements. These bilateral treaties collectively constrained destabilising systems, created stable expectations about force structures, and contributed to crisis and arms race stability during the late Cold War.

C. Deep Reductions and the Post-Cold War Treaty Architecture

The end of the Cold War allowed for deeper cuts in strategic arsenals through the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and START II) and related agreements. START I, signed in 1991 and entering into force in 1994, mandated significant reductions in deployed strategic warheads and delivery vehicles, reducing each side’s accountable warheads to 6,000 and imposing detailed counting rules and verification measures. While START II, signed in 1993, never entered into force, both sides implemented substantial reductions, and the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) programs facilitated the dismantlement of nuclear weapons and infrastructure in former Soviet republics.

In the early 2000s, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT or Moscow Treaty) and later the New START Treaty (2010) further reduced deployed strategic warheads and launchers, albeit with differing verification intensity. New START, which entered into force in 2011, limits each party to 1,550 deployed strategic warheads and includes robust verification provisions such as inspections, data exchanges, and notifications, thereby sustaining transparency despite political tensions. These measures contributed to a long-term downward trend in U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals relative to Cold War peaks.

D. Multilateral Test-Ban and Prohibition Initiatives

Parallel to bilateral reductions, multilateral initiatives sought to constrain nuclear testing and, eventually, nuclear weapons themselves. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1996, prohibits all nuclear test explosions and established an International Monitoring System (IMS) of seismic, hydroacoustic, infrasound, and radionuclide stations. Although the CTBT has not yet entered into force due to ratification requirements by specific states, most nuclear-armed states have observed testing moratoria, and the IMS has proven effective in detecting nuclear tests such as those conducted by North Korea. More recently, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), adopted in 2017 and entering into force in 2021, prohibits its parties from developing, possessing, or using nuclear weapons, reflecting humanitarian concerns and dissatisfaction among many NNWS with the pace of disarmament under the NPT. While no recognised NWS have joined the TPNW, the treaty has shifted normative debates and created new legal obligations among its parties, potentially affecting long-term disarmament dynamics.

E. Regional Regimes and Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones

Regional nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs) have complemented global treaties by prohibiting nuclear weapons within defined geographic areas and establishing verification arrangements. Key NWFZ treaties include the Treaty of Tlatelolco (Latin America and the Caribbean), Rarotonga (South Pacific), Bangkok (Southeast Asia), Pelindaba (Africa), and Semipalatinsk (Central Asia), many of which entered into force in the post-1970 period. These regimes have generally been successful in keeping nuclear weapons out of their respective regions, although questions remain about the scope of security assurances from NWS and the treatment of transit and stationing rights.

4. VERIFICATION AND COMPLIANCE MECHANISMS

A. Evolution of Verification Tools

Verification mechanisms in nuclear arms control have evolved from reliance on national technical means (NTM) to complex, treaty-mandated systems combining remote sensing, on-site inspections, and data exchanges. Early agreements such as SALT and ABM codified the principle that NTM would be used to monitor compliance and that interference with such means was prohibited, thereby legitimising surveillance and reducing misperceptions. Later treaties, including INF, START, and New START, institutionalised cooperative verification through inspection regimes, portal monitoring, and telemetry sharing.

In the non-proliferation domain, IAEA safeguards have expanded to incorporate improved measurement technologies, environmental sampling, satellite imagery analysis, and the Additional Protocol’s access provisions, enhancing the agency’s ability to detect undeclared activities. The CTBT’s International Monitoring System and on-site inspection provisions, although not yet fully operational due to the treaty’s

non-entry into force, demonstrate further progress in global verification capacity.

Table 1: Selected Nuclear Arms Control Treaties Since 1970 (Illustrative)

| Treaty/Agreement | Entry into force | Parties (approx.) | Core obligations | Key verification features |
|------------------|------------------------|--|--|---|
| NPT | 1970 | ~191 states | NNWS renounce nuclear weapons; NWS pursue disarmament and peaceful uses cooperation. | IAEA comprehensive safeguards; facility inspections; material accountancy. |
| ABM Treaty | 1972 (terminated 2002) | USA, USSR/Russia | Limits ABM systems to preserve mutual deterrence. | NTM; notifications; no on-site inspections. |
| INF Treaty | 1988 (terminated 2019) | USA, USSR/Russia | Eliminates ground-launched missiles 500–5,500 km. | On-site inspections; continuous monitoring; data exchanges. |
| START I | 1994–2009 | USA, Russia + successor states | Reduces deployed strategic warheads and launchers. | Intrusive inspections; telemetry; NTM; notifications. |
| New START | 2011 | USA, Russia | Limits deployed strategic warheads to 1,550. | On-site inspections; data exchanges; NTM. |
| CTBT* | Not yet in force | 185 signatories, 178 ratifications | Bans all nuclear test explosions. | International Monitoring System; on-site inspections (planned). |
| TPNW | 2021 | 90+ signatories, 70+ parties (approx.) | Prohibits the development, possession, and use of nuclear weapons. | National implementation; IAEA safeguards for parties with nuclear activities. |

*CTBT has established provisional verification mechanisms despite non-entry into force.

B. Compliance Controversies and Enforcement

Despite advances in verification, the arms control regime has experienced numerous compliance crises and alleged violations. Examples include clandestine nuclear weapons programs revealed in Iraq in the early 1990s, evidence of undeclared nuclear activities in Iran, and North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT and subsequent nuclear tests. Additionally, the United

States and Russia have accused each other of violating obligations under the ABM and INF Treaties, contributing to their eventual demise.

Enforcement mechanisms have tended to rely on diplomatic pressure, UN Security Council resolutions, and economic sanctions rather than automatic punitive measures embedded in treaty texts. The lack of assured, timely enforcement has raised concerns about moral hazard, yet the political and economic costs associated with violations, combined with verification-driven exposure, have still deterred some forms of non-compliance.

Table 2: Compliance Challenges

| Case | Relevant regime | Nature of the issue | Response |
|--------------|----------------------|--|---|
| Iraq (1990s) | NPT, IAEA safeguards | Discovery of a clandestine nuclear weapons program despite safeguards. | Enhanced safeguards (Additional Protocol); UNSC inspections and sanctions. |
| DPRK | NPT, IAEA | Safeguards non-compliance, NPT withdrawal, nuclear testing. | UNSC sanctions; Six-Party Talks; limited agreements; no durable settlement. |
| Iran | NPT, IAEA | Alleged clandestine activities; questions about military dimensions. | JCOA (2015) with expanded verification; later U.S. withdrawal and renewed tensions. |
| INF disputes | INF Treaty | Alleged development and deployment of prohibited missiles. | Diplomatic accusations; U.S. suspension and withdrawal; treaty termination. |

ARMS CONTROL AND STRATEGIC STABILITY ACROSS HISTORICAL PERIODS

A. Détente to Late Cold War (1970s–1980s)

During the 1970s, arms control emerged as a central instrument of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union, aiming to cap strategic competition and reduce the risk of inadvertent nuclear war. SALT and the ABM Treaty institutionalised mutual vulnerability while preventing unrestrained expansion of launchers and defences, thereby contributing to arms race stability. At the same time, large arsenals and multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) meant that crisis stability remained fragile, as both sides retained significant first-strike capabilities. The 1980s saw both renewed confrontation and significant arms control breakthroughs. The INF Treaty removed an entire class of missiles that were seen as highly destabilising in Europe, while

The 1986 Reykjavik summit set the stage for subsequent deep reductions. Despite the deployment of new systems and persistent tensions, the cumulative effect of arms control and confidence-building measures, such as hotlines and risk reduction centres, enhanced transparency and reduced the likelihood of accidental escalation.

B. Post-Cold War Reductions and Institutionalisation (1990s–2000s)

The post-Cold War period offered unprecedented opportunities for nuclear reductions, as reflected in START I implementation, the negotiated but unrealised START II, and parallel unilateral initiatives to withdraw and dismantle tactical nuclear weapons. Cooperative Threat Reduction programs, such as the Nunn–Lugar initiative, helped secure and dismantle nuclear arsenals and materials in newly independent states like Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, preventing further proliferation. These efforts

bolstered both crisis and arms race stability by reducing numbers and securing materials.

At the same time, the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 and the negotiation of the CTBT in 1996 reinforced the normative and institutional framework for non-proliferation and disarmament. However, the period also revealed limits to regime effectiveness, as illustrated by the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998, the DPRK’s incremental nuclear advances, and persistent dissatisfaction among NNWS over the perceived slow pace of disarmament by NWS. These tensions foreshadowed later legitimacy challenges to the regime’s disarmament pillar.

C. Erosion and Multipolar Complexity (2010s–Mid-2020s)

The 2010s and early 2020s witnessed significant erosion of the nuclear arms control architecture, coinciding with intensifying rivalry among major powers and the emergence of new technologies. The U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002, the collapse of the INF Treaty in 2019, and concerns about the future of New START highlighted the fragility of bilateral arms control in an environment of mutual suspicion and shifting force structures. Simultaneously, the rise of China as a more significant nuclear actor, modernisation programs in all NWS, and developments in missile defence, hypersonic systems, and cyber capabilities complicated traditional deterrence models.

The humanitarian initiative and the adoption of the TPNW reflected growing normative pressure from NNWS and civil society for more rapid disarmament and deeper delegitimation of nuclear weapons. Yet the refusal of NWS and nuclear-armed states outside the NPT to join the TPNW underscored the divide between disarmament advocates and deterrence-oriented security establishments, raising questions about whether the emerging legal bifurcation strengthens or undermines long-term strategic stability. At the same time, regional crises involving North Korea, Iran, and South Asia highlighted ongoing proliferation and escalation risks that existing regimes have struggled to fully address.

5. DISCUSSION

A. Achievements and Limitations of Nuclear Arms Control

Since 1970, nuclear arms control has achieved several notable

successes, including the near-universalisation of the NPT, deep reductions in U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals, and the establishment of robust verification systems in both bilateral and multilateral contexts. These accomplishments have reduced the probability of large-scale nuclear war, limited the number of states with nuclear weapons compared to worst-case projections, and created a dense web of norms and institutions that shape state behaviour.

However, arms control regimes have not eliminated nuclear weapons, prevented all proliferation, or fully resolved underlying security dilemmas. Structural inequalities embedded in the NPT, chronic compliance disputes, and gaps in coverage (such as the lack of binding limits on certain categories of non-strategic nuclear weapons or new technologies) have constrained effectiveness. Furthermore, domestic political changes and deteriorating great-power relations have repeatedly undermined treaty stability, illustrating the dependence of arms control on broader geopolitical conditions.

B. Strategic Stability in a Changing Technological and Political Landscape

Looking forward, the relationship between arms control and strategic stability is being reshaped by multipolarity and technological innovation. The entrance or modernisation of additional nuclear actors—such as China, India, Pakistan, and potentially others—creates more complex deterrence networks, where bilateral frameworks may be insufficient to manage escalation risks. Emerging technologies like hypersonic glide vehicles, cyber operations targeting command-and-control systems, and increasingly sophisticated missile defence systems can generate uncertainty about second-strike capabilities, potentially undermining crisis stability.

In this context, traditional numerical limits on strategic delivery systems may need to be complemented by new forms of transparency, risk-reduction, and behavioural rules. These might include norms governing cyber operations against nuclear command-and-control, agreements on the deployment and use of certain hypersonic systems, and expanded multilateral consultations among nuclear-armed states. Strengthening and adapting verification technologies, including remote sensing, data analytics, and cooperative monitoring, will remain crucial to sustaining confidence and enabling innovative arms control arrangements.

Table 3: Future Arms Control Priorities

| Priority area | Rationale | Potential instruments |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Multilateral strategic dialogue | Reflects the emergence of a multipolar nuclear order. | P5 and broader nuclear-armed states’ consultations; transparency measures. |
| Technological risk management | Addresses the destabilising effects of new systems (hypersonic, cyber). | Codes of conduct, limits on certain deployments, and crisis communication channels. |
| Revitalizing verification | Keeps pace with dispersed, concealed, and dual-use capabilities. | Advanced sensors; data-sharing; cooperative monitoring; societal verification concepts. |
| Bridging the NPT-TPNW divide | Reduces normative fragmentation and disarmament tensions. | Dialogue on risk reduction, victim assistance, and transparency across regimes. |

6. CONCLUSION

The evolution of nuclear arms control regimes since 1970 reveals an arc from foundational non-proliferation and bilateral superpower constraints through deep reductions and

institutionalisation, to a present marked by partial erosion and complex adaptation. Arms control has demonstrably reduced arsenals, slowed proliferation, and provided mechanisms for transparency and communication that have supported strategic

stability, even amid crises and geopolitical rivalry. Yet repeated compliance crises, treaty withdrawals, and the growing salience of new nuclear actors and technologies underscore that past arrangements cannot simply be extended unchanged into the future. Future strategic stability will depend on revitalising and modernising arms control in ways that address multipolarity, technological disruption, and normative fragmentation. This will likely require expanded multilateral frameworks, innovative verification tools, and renewed political will among both nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon states to reconcile deterrence requirements with long-term disarmament and humanitarian imperatives. Although the environment is challenging, the history of nuclear arms control since 1970 demonstrates that negotiated limits and cooperative verification can play a central role in managing existential risks, suggesting that abandoning such efforts would itself be a significant source of instability.

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