



ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY

Strategic stability and arms control in a tripolar nuclear world: “One step forward, two steps back”

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Note: *The views presented in this memorandum are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the organizations or institutions with which they are affiliated.*

Policy Memo

TO:

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DATE: May, 2026

SUBJECT: Strategic stability and arms control in a tripolar nuclear world: “One step forward, two steps back”

Abstract

The global nuclear order is undergoing a historic transformation. With the expiration of the New START Treaty in 2026 and China’s rapid arsenal expansion, the world entered an unprecedented tripolar nuclear configuration. As China approaches strategic parity, Russia accelerates its modernization while leveraging arms control as both a geopolitical tool and an economic constraint. Meanwhile, the United States navigates eroding bipartisan consensus and the limitations of Cold War-era frameworks ill-suited for contemporary realities.

This article examines whether a Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) exists for a trilateral arms control framework among the United States, Russia, and China. Drawing on the concept of the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA), it evaluates each power’s strategic calculus and identifies overlapping interests despite persistent asymmetries and mistrust. The paper argues that while significant structural barriers remain, a narrow but viable ZOPA may lie in a flexible agreement capping deployed warheads between 1,600 and 2,000—parameters that accommodate China’s buildup, preserve U.S.–Russia parity, and reduce the risks of a renewed, unconstrained arms race. A reimagined arms control architecture—anchored in parity, strategic restraint, and negotiated flexibility—may yet offer a path to stability in an increasingly multipolar nuclear world.

Introduction

The decades-old arms control architecture is crumbling. With the expiration of the New START Treaty in 2026, the last remaining bilateral nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia has now lapsed.

For the first time, the world is entering a tripolar nuclear order. A new arms race is underway: China is expanding its arsenal, Russia is deploying new delivery systems, and the United States is investing in

¹ This memo was written as a requirement of the 2025-2026 Arms Control Negotiation Academy program. Views expressed in the memo are the opinions of the authors and do not reflect the views of their employers.

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layered missile defenses.² Notably, “modernization” carries different meanings for each: replacement in the U.S. case, diversification for Russia, and expansion combined with qualitative improvement for China. In just five years, China has doubled its operational warheads to roughly 600, compelling Washington to deter two nuclear-armed peers—Russia and China—whose strategic coordination is growing.³

A renewed, unregulated arms race would impose enormous financial costs and heighten the risk of nuclear escalation. Yet each approaches arms control from a different strategic position, shaped by China’s rapid buildup, Russia’s confrontation with the West, and the United States’ effort to manage two-front deterrence while modernizing its forces.

Because all three nuclear powers stand to gain from some form of negotiated restraint, this article postures whether a Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) exists for a trilateral arms control framework. Any viable arrangement may require allowing higher deployed warhead limits than the New START treaty permitted, taking “one step forward” to make participation politically feasible in order to create the conditions to take “two steps back” through future reductions.

From Exclusion to Assertion: China’s Evolving Role in Nuclear Arms Control

China’s approach to nuclear arms control is best understood not as mere cautiousness, but as a deliberate strategy of delay and leverage. Having long been excluded from the U.S.-Russia arms control framework, Beijing has little incentive to accept constraints that would freeze existing asymmetries while its arsenal is still expanding. Instead, China has prioritized strategic autonomy, force modernization, and the preservation of ambiguity in force posture, using non-participation as a way to maximize bargaining power and avoid locking itself into a position of permanent inferiority. It is worth noting that Beijing has long placed a high premium on opacity in its nuclear programme, as shown by years of denying its buildup and claiming that about 300 new missile silos near the capital were only wind farms.⁴

In the near term, this posture gives Beijing a strong alternative to negotiation: it can continue building its forces, limit transparency, and engage selectively in risk-reduction dialogues at relatively low political and strategic cost. The result is a narrow and asymmetric negotiating space, in which China’s incentives to join formal arms control remain weak unless the structure of any future agreement accommodates its

² The so-called “Golden Dome” refers to emerging U.S. proposals for a multi-layered missile defense architecture capable of intercepting ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missiles across all phases of flight. While not yet operational or officially named, such a system would likely integrate ground-based interceptors, sea-based Aegis systems, advanced radar, and a constellation of space-based sensors and potential interceptors. Its goal is to create a globally distributed, persistent detection and interception capability, including boost-phase and mid-course targeting. See: Congressional Research Service, “Defense Primer: The Golden Dome for America,” Sep. 29, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF13115>; CSIS, “America’s Golden Dome Explained,” June 4, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-golden-dome-explained>; and CSIS, “Golden Dome for America: Assessing Chinese and Russian Reactions,” Nov. 20, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/golden-dome-america-assessing-chinese-and-russian-reactions>.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2024), <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-IN-VOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF>

⁴ Rose Gottemoeller, “Arms Control Is Not Dead Yet.” Foreign Affairs, April 15, 2025. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/arms-control-not-dead-yet>.

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growth trajectory and status ambitions. China has therefore consistently prioritized strategic autonomy over negotiated constraints.

Under Xi Jinping, nuclear modernization has been linked to “national rejuvenation” and the goal of a “strong army” by 2049, elevating the PLA Rocket Force and accelerating the pursuit of systems such as Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (HGVs) and Multiple Independently-targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) to circumvent missile defenses.⁵ This reinforces Beijing’s emphasis on strategic autonomy and its resistance to constraints that could limit future force development. From its early skepticism toward test ban initiatives, to its conditional accession to the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1992, Beijing has sought to preserve freedom of action in the nuclear domain.⁶ Its posture emphasizes force modernization, a secure second-strike capability, minimum deterrence, and a declared no-first-use policy, while resisting binding commitments absent substantial U.S.-Russian reductions.⁷ In this context, accepting reductions is widely viewed in Beijing as entrenching strategic inferiority rather than advancing equal status.⁸

Under this logic, China’s scope for arms control engagement remains narrow. Beijing continues to reject formal negotiations as long as significant quantitative asymmetries persist, arguing that states with the largest arsenals bear primary responsibility for disarmament. This position, reaffirmed in China’s 2023 white paper, Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era, frames deep U.S.-Russian reductions as a prerequisite for Chinese participation and criticizes arms control frameworks that institutionalize unequal obligations. These concerns are reinforced by Chinese perceptions that U.S. missile defense efforts threaten the credibility of its second-strike capability, strengthening Beijing’s preference for autonomy over constraint.⁹ At the same time, the document acknowledges limited overlapping interests, particularly in strategic stability, risk reduction, and crisis management, suggesting that a narrow ZOPA is not foreclosed.¹⁰

Transparency helps delineate the contours of China’s limited arms control engagement. Beijing resists intrusive verification and broad disclosure, viewing them as threats to its deterrent, but remains open to “managed transparency” that preserves its second-strike capability.¹¹ In practice, this has translated into support for normative processes, such as P5 dialogues on doctrine, crisis management, emerging technologies, conditional openness to no-first-use commitments, de-alerting measures, and technical discussions on the CTBT¹² and FMCT¹³, all of which allow China to shape the nuclear order while preserving strategic ambiguity and autonomy.¹⁴

⁵ Nicola Leveringhaus, *Chinese Nuclear Force Modernization and Doctrinal Change* (Paris, 2022), 10–15.

⁶ Santoro, “Getting Past No,” 76; Li Bin, “China’s Potential to Contribute to Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament,” *Arms Control Today* (March 2011)

⁷ Santoro, “Getting Past No,” 72–73

⁸ Santoro, “Getting Past No,” 72.

⁹ Nicola Leveringhaus, *Chinese Nuclear Force Modernization and Doctrinal Change* (Paris: 2022), 6, 9, 11.

¹⁰ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (SCIO), *China’s Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era* (Beijing, 2025).

¹¹ Santoro, “Getting Past No,” 77, and SCIO, *China’s Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era*.

¹² Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty

¹³ Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty

¹⁴ China has also participated in P5 meetings addressing the impact of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber threats, and space-based systems on nuclear stability, emphasizing political commitments over binding agreements. See SCIO, *China’s Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation in the New Era*; Li, B. “China’s Potential to Contribute to Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament”.

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China’s cautious approach reflects both historical exclusion and current strategic calculus. It treats arms control not as a priority, but as a long-term option conditional on greater parity and mutual trust. Accordingly, China’s engagement lies not in near-term disarmament, but in incremental efforts to manage nuclear risk and stabilize great-power competition.¹⁵

Russia’s Evolving Arms Control Calculus

Russia’s posture toward the New START reflects a strategic duality: it has long viewed arms control as a rare channel for parity-based dialogue with Washington and suspended its participation in February 2023 during the war with Ukraine and isolation from the West.¹⁶ President Putin justified the decision by citing U.S. noncompliance with inspection obligations and framing the suspension as a response to broader Western efforts to inflict a “strategic defeat” on Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine.¹⁷

Bilateral treaties like New START provided Russia with strategic stability, transparency, and a cost-effective cap on nuclear arms. Although Moscow suspended implementation of New START in 2023, it pledged to remain within the 1,550 deployed warhead limits, albeit without permitting U.S. verification. The collapse of New START risks imposing steep long-term costs on Russia to sustain its great-power status, especially in an unconstrained arms race involving emerging technologies and additional actors.¹⁸

While nuclear modernization remains a priority for the Kremlin, technological and resource constraints make stable mutual limits more attractive than an open-ended competition. The RS-28 Sarmat has suffered repeated delays, and the nuclear-powered Burevestnik continues to face technical challenges.¹⁹ Ukraine’s Operation Spiderweb further exposed vulnerabilities in Russia’s strategic air forces, likely reinforcing Moscow’s emphasis on land- and sea-based legs of the triad.²⁰ At the same time, Moscow has unveiled new nuclear-capable systems, including the Poseidon nuclear-powered torpedo, the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle, and the Oreshnik IRBM, signaling a push to diversify its arsenal beyond traditional arms control categories.²¹

This logic also underpins Russia’s 2023 claim that the United States met New START limits through technical manipulation. Moscow accused Washington of excluding 56 Trident II SLBM launchers and 41

¹⁵ Santoro, “Getting Past No,” 7–8.

¹⁶ RBC. “Putin Announced the Suspension of Participation in the Nuclear Missile Treaty.” RBC, February 21, 2023. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/02/2023/63f4a0d29a79475ff2892d5d>.

¹⁷ Bugos, Shannon. “Understanding the Dispute Over New START”. Arms Control Association, April 2023. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-04/news/understanding-dispute-over-new-start>.

¹⁸ Williams, Heather. “Russia Still Needs Arms Control”. Arms Control Association, February 2016. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-01/features/russia-still-needs-arms-control>.

¹⁹ Tenisheva, Anastasia. “What We Know About Russia’s Latest Test of the Nuclear-Powered Burevestnik Missile”. The Moscow Times, 27 October 2025. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/10/27/what-we-know-about-russias-latest-test-of-the-nuclear-powered-burevestnik-missile-a90939>.

²⁰ Vaddi, Pranay. “Beware Russia Bearing Arms Control Gifts”. RUSI, 17 November 2025.

<https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org>. Starchak, Maxim. “Ukraine’s Drone Attack on Russia’s Strategic Aviation Has Broader Implications”. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 June 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2025/06/russia-nuclear-force-shuffle?lang=en>.

²¹ Oreshnik is widely believed to be a modified version of the RS-26 Rubezh, a system previously developed and shelved. See: Kaushal, Sidharth, and Matthew Savill. “The Oreshnik Ballistic Missile: From Russia with Love?” RUSI, 18 November 2025. <https://www.rusi.orghttps://www.rusi.org>.

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B-52H bombers by declaring them “converted,” despite lacking the access needed to verify that they were rendered incapable of carrying nuclear weapons, as the treaty requires.²² Russia also objected to the U.S. reclassification of four silo-based ICBM launchers as “training silos”, a category not defined in the treaty. Including these systems, Moscow claims that the United States exceeds New START limits by 101 units across heavy bombers, ICBM launchers, and SLBM launchers.²³

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing expansion of NATO’s role, including U.S. intelligence sharing and missile transfers, have further collapsed the broader arms control framework and reinforced Moscow’s insistence on linking strategic stability to wider political and conventional issues. This linkage is mirrored in Russia’s 2024 nuclear doctrine, which expands the list of “military dangers” to include missile defense, long-range conventional strike, space and cyber capabilities, and the isolation of Russian territories such as Kaliningrad.²⁴

Together, these threat perceptions sharply constrain Russia’s negotiating space.²⁵ While Moscow opposes further U.S. strategic modernization, it is simultaneously hedging against it. The deployment of new strategic systems, the stationing of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, and Russia’s conventional posture in Europe function as both deterrent signals and potential bargaining chips in future negotiations over strategic stability and the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe.²⁶

²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. ‘On the Russian-American START Treaty and the Situation That Led to the Decision to Suspend It’. 20 April 2023.

https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/1413415/.

²³ Bugos, “Understanding the Dispute Over New START.” Russia also objects to NATO’s nuclear sharing and the exclusion of British and French arsenals from U.S.-Russia arms control. When New START was signed in 2010, it was part of a broader framework, alongside the CFE, INF, and Open Skies treaties, that helped Russia offset NATO’s technological advantages and nuclear sharing benefits through legal constraints during a brief U.S.-Russia “reset.”[#] With the absence of such agreements, Moscow insists that all NATO nuclear capabilities be included in future negotiations. In 2023, Moscow deployed tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, likely including warheads for Iskander-M missiles and gravity bombs for Belarus-based aircraft.[#] In its 2024 nuclear doctrine, Moscow extended deterrence to Belarus, including against conventional threats, and redefined aggression by any military coalition member as aggression by the entire bloc, explicitly including attacks “with the participation or support” of nuclear states. For more on this, see Wisotzki, Simone, and Ulrich Kühn. ‘Crisis in Arms Control: An Introduction’. *Zeitschrift Für Friedens- Und Konfliktforschung* 10, no. 2 (2021): 183–94.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42597-022-00074-8>, and Karach, Olga. ‘Nuclear Weapons in Belarus: What We Know’. ICAN, 22 November 2024. https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_weapons_in_belarus_what_we_know

²⁴ Defense Mirror. ‘US Missile Defence Systems Threaten Russian Strategic Deterrence System: Kremlin’. 13 October 2017.

https://defensemirror.com/news/20951/US_Missile_Defence_Systems_Threaten_Russian_Strategic_Deterrence_System_Kremlin.

²⁵ Russia has cited multiple logistical and political obstacles to resuming dialogue under New START. These include disrupted commercial air routes, lack of overflight guarantees for Ministry of Defense aircraft, difficulties obtaining transit visas, and blocked payment systems that hinder activities in the United States. In 2022, Moscow also attributed the breakdown of the 20th Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) session to the U.S. refusal to agree on the venue, format, or a balanced agenda—accusing Washington of seeking to resume inspections without addressing Russia’s substantive concerns. Additionally, Russia has pointed to Ukrainian strikes on treaty-covered strategic sites, allegedly enabled by U.S. intelligence and technical support, as further justification for suspending engagement. See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

²⁶ Hayrtidinov, Vilnur. ‘On the issue of the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons on the territory of the Republic of Belarus’. *PIR Center*, 28 March 2023.

<https://pircenter.org/editions/k-voprosu-o-razmeshhenii-rossijskogo-tjao-na-territorii-respubliki-belarus-serija-blic-in-tervju-pir-centra/>.

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Although China’s growing arsenal is a secondary concern for Moscow due to its current alignment with Beijing, Russia would still prefer to keep China below the threshold of mutual vulnerability.²⁷ In practice, this means any future arms control arrangement is likely to hinge less on purely strategic numbers than on broader political conditions and constraints in the non-strategic domain.

U.S. Arms Control Strategy: Between Security Commitments and the Legacy of ‘Peace Through Strength’

The United States, once a principal architect of nuclear arms control, now struggles to define a coherent strategy in a rapidly shifting tripolar order. The lapse of New START in 2026 marked not only a legal turning point but also exposed the erosion of bipartisan support and strategic clarity in Washington’s nuclear posture.²⁸ While Cold War-era slogans like “peace through strength” persist, they increasingly function as rhetoric rather than strategy, obscuring the absence of a viable arms control framework.²⁹

From President Trump’s trilateral overtures to the Biden administration’s attempt to restore traditional diplomacy, the U.S. approach has lacked the strategic continuity that once underpinned Cold War-era arms control. Trump’s withdrawal from the INF and Open Skies Treaties, coupled with a performative push for trilateral negotiations, eroded existing verification frameworks without producing a viable alternative. While these moves reflected an implicit recognition that arms control must adapt to a multipolar nuclear order, they did not translate that recognition into a coherent strategy. Today, Washington retains greater leverage with Russia than with China, but even limited engagement with Beijing is increasingly framed in political and signaling terms rather than as a pathway to reciprocal disarmament.

Beyond diplomatic signaling, U.S. arms control policy is constrained by force-planning realities. Unlike during the Cold War, Washington must now plan against two near-peer nuclear adversaries simultaneously. U.S. targeting doctrine, long oriented toward counterforce and damage limitation, treats Chinese and Russian strategic assets as parallel planning problems rather than substitutes. This two-front deterrence requirement complicates frameworks based on simple numerical parity, as equal ceilings would require the United States to consider force sufficiency against two nuclear-armed peers simultaneously. These pressures, reinforced by China’s opacity and growing arsenal, have already driven

²⁷ Yuandan, Guo, and Xu Yelu. “Chinese, Russian Militaries Hold 3rd Joint Anti-Missile Exercise, Working Together to Jointly Reinforce Post-World War II Order.” *Global Times*, December 7, 2025. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202512/1349933.shtml>.

²⁸ A Pew Research Center survey found only 38% of Americans believe there is “at least some common ground” between Republicans and Democrats on foreign policy, down by 16 points from the previous year. The same study notes that across six major issue areas, the share of adults perceiving bipartisan common ground dropped by an average of 12 percentage points since 2023. Daniller, Andrew. “Americans See Little Bipartisan Common Ground, But More on Foreign Policy Than on Abortion, Guns.” Pew Research Center, June 25 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/25/americans-see-little-bipartisan-common-ground-but-more-on-foreign-policy-than-on-abortion-guns/>.

²⁹ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum. “Peace Through Strength.” Permanent Exhibits. Accessed November 7, 2025. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/permanent-exhibits/peace-through-strength>. The White House. “President Donald J. Trump Is Leading with Peace Through Strength.” March 4, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/03/president-trump-is-leading-with-peace-through-strength/>.

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calls within Washington for warhead uploads, expanded production capacity, and, potentially, higher deployed ceilings.

The strategic risks of losing New START without a credible successor are best understood through the historical arc of U.S. arms control policy. During the Cold War and its aftermath, arms control was a central pillar of U.S. nuclear strategy, particularly in managing the bilateral relationship with the Soviet Union and later Russia. Agreements such as SALT, START, and ultimately New START reflected a shared recognition of the dangers of unconstrained nuclear competition.³⁰ Ronald Reagan's approach, pursuing arms control while modernizing the U.S. arsenal, established a durable precedent: strategic strength and negotiated restraint could reinforce, rather than undermine, each other.³¹ Under President Obama, this logic culminated in the New START Treaty, which capped deployed strategic warheads at 1,550 per side. That trajectory unraveled under President Trump, whose administration withdrew from the INF and Open Skies treaties and launched a poorly grounded push for a trilateral agreement with China and Russia.³² While these moves reflected a recognition that arms control must adapt to a multipolar nuclear order, they also accelerated the erosion of transparency and strategic predictability that had anchored U.S. nuclear policy for decades.

Meanwhile, China has emerged as a major nuclear power without the legacy of bilateral arms control or established transparency norms that shaped U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russian relations. This makes Beijing a fundamentally different—and more complex—negotiating partner than Moscow: less bound by precedent, more resistant to traditional verification practices, and less invested in arms control as an institution. The result is that U.S. arms control strategy now confronts not just the erosion of old frameworks, but the absence of a shared baseline with a rising third nuclear peer.

At the same time, U.S. arms control policy remains tightly linked to its global security commitments, particularly extended deterrence guarantees to NATO, Japan, and South Korea. Maintaining credibility with allies requires balancing military assurance with diplomatic restraint, a task made more complex by growing competition with both Russia and China and by accelerating modernization on all sides. In this context, Washington faces a dual challenge: preserving strategic stability while adapting arms control to a tripolar nuclear order where assumptions of bilateral parity and mutual vulnerability no longer apply.

The basis for a trilateral arms control framework

While their strategies diverge, the three major nuclear powers all share a core interests in avoiding nuclear war, limiting proliferation, and containing the costs of unconstrained competition. These shared stakes shape each country's Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) and help identify a

³⁰ Gottemoeller, Rose. "U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Negotiations - A Short History." The Foreign Service Journal, May 2020. American Foreign Service Association.

<https://afsa.org/us-russian-nuclear-arms-control-negotiations-short-history>.

³¹ Kimball, Daryl G. "Looking Back: The Nuclear Arms Control Legacy of Ronald Reagan." Arms Control Today, July 2004.

<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004-07/arms-control-today/looking-back-nuclear-arms-control-legacy-ronald-reagan>.

³² Support for Trump: "My bottom line regarding this difficult decision is that the United States had good reason to withdraw from the INF Treaty, and it had the support of U.S. allies. A treaty that is being hollowed out from the inside is no longer in the U.S. national security interest, which must be the litmus test for any nuclear arms control treaty." <https://afsa.org/us-russian-nuclear-arms-control-negotiations-short-history>

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potential Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA).³³ The central obstacle, however, is the commitment problem: each party assumes the others may comply formally while eroding the agreement in practice.

United States’ BATNA: The United States is already pursuing a sweeping nuclear modernization program, replacing all three legs of the triad to sustain deterrence in an increasingly multipolar environment. If arms control collapses, Washington’s realistic alternatives are either to expand beyond New START-era force levels or to seek informal restraints to avoid unconstrained competition. A large-scale buildup, however, would impose enormous financial and strategic costs, deepening an arms race Washington would prefer to avoid, even as it continues to hedge against both Russian and Chinese capabilities.

Russia’s BATNA: Having modernized over 90 percent of its strategic nuclear forces and developed a new generation of nuclear-capable systems, Russia holds a relatively strong short-term BATNA. It has little incentive to accept new constraints absent concessions on missile defense, conventional forces, and Western support to Ukraine. In the absence of an agreement, Moscow can maintain its deterrent posture. However, this advantage is time-limited: an unconstrained U.S. or Chinese expansion could erode Russia’s relative position.. Arms control also serves Russia’s geopolitical interests by legitimizing its nuclear parity with the United States and restoring strategic dialogue. Engaging now allows Moscow to shape future competition under more manageable conditions.

China’s BATNA: Absent a formal agreement, China is likely to continue its gradual strategic breakout. Its expanding nuclear and conventional capabilities already provide a credible deterrent against U.S. escalation, allowing Beijing to pursue regional objectives without external constraints. In the short term, autonomy combined with minimal transparency obligations reduces incentives for arms control engagement. Over time, however, unconstrained expansion may carry trade-offs, including rising costs, regional counterbalancing, and potential U.S. force expansion. While Beijing shows little interest in joining existing bilateral frameworks, it may eventually see value in shaping new multilateral arrangements that protect its gains and institutionalize its great-power status.

Determining the ZOPA

As argued above, there are compelling arguments for why the three main nuclear powers all have interests in entering a trilateral arms control agreement that regulates their nuclear forces. While deep mutual mistrust and differing nuclear strategies present challenges, each country stands to gain from enhanced predictability, reduced arms race incentives, and lower risks of escalation and miscalculation. Moreover, all three powers have an inherent interest in securing both their interest and strategic stability at the lowest cost possible. However, we do not consider it realistic that any of the three states would be willing to compromise on their own security in order to reach an agreement.

³³ As Fisher, Ury, and Patton (2011) argue, any agreement should be measured against the outcomes attainable without negotiation—known as the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA), which defines a party’s walk-away point. However, knowing one’s BATNA is not enough. Mnookin, Peppet, and Tulumello (2000) emphasize the need to translate the BATNA into a concrete reservation value—the minimum a party is willing to accept before walking away. When the reservation values of negotiating parties overlap, this creates a Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA). See: Fisher, R., Ury, W., and Patton, B., *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2011); and Mnookin, R. H., Peppet, S. R., and Tulumello, A. S., *Beyond Winning: Negotiating to Create Value in Deals and Disputes* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).

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The nuclear relationship between Russia and the United States has, for six decades, been grounded in the principle of parity – the idea that numerical equivalence should guide strategic balance. In practice, this meant that as long as both countries maintained similar overall warhead limits, they could deploy them across different types of delivery systems.³⁴ Since the principle of parity has withstood the test of time, we argue that numerical equivalence should remain a central guiding factor in establishing a trilateral arms control framework. Accordingly, our approach to defining the Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) has been shaped by a key question: How many deployed nuclear weapons does each power view as essential to its security?

Authoritative, unclassified answers to this question are not easy to come by. However, at a Senate hearing in March 2022, Admiral Charles Richard, then-Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, was asked whether the United States needed to adjust its nuclear force posture to account for two peer adversaries. He answered affirmatively, stating that while it was not necessary to match adversaries weapon-for-weapon, the current U.S. arsenal represented “the absolute minimum” required to execute its deterrence strategy. He emphasized that U.S. capability, capacity, and posture should evolve in response to shifting threats.³⁵

Since then, U.S. and Russian warhead numbers have remained relatively stable, while China has increased its operational warhead stockpile from 400 to approximately 600. According to the Pentagon, this number is projected to reach 1,000 by the end of the decade and possibly 1,500 by 2035.³⁶ In other words, China is capable of adding roughly 100 new warheads to its arsenal each year.

If China were to enter into a trilateral arms agreement covering the next ten years, e.g. the same longevity as New START, Beijing would not be limited if the agreement capped the number of deployed nuclear warheads to 1600, as this would be the maximum number of warheads China would be able to accumulate during this period. Moreover, it is unlikely that all of China’s warheads would be deployed. For comparison, both Russia and the US were restricted to deploy a maximum of 1550 warheads under New START, but in addition both kept more than 3500 warheads in reserve.

For China, whose main objection to an arms control agreement has been that it is not interested in entering an agreement limiting their potential before they are on par with the other two major nuclear powers, it is safe to assume that their reservation value would at least be a deal which takes into account these two qualms. Hence, for Beijing, entering into a 10-year agreement which allows for a maximum of 1600 deployed nuclear weapons or more, could be valuable.

³⁴ Rose Gottemoeller, "Arms Control Is Not Dead Yet." *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2025.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/arms-control-not-dead-yet>

³⁵ Ibid, and U.S. Senate, *Committee on Armed Services, Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States Strategic Command and United States Space Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2023 and the Future Years Defense Program*, 117th Cong., 2nd sess., March 8, 2022,

https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-08_03-08-2022.pdf.

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense. *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022: Annual Report to Congress*. November 29, 2022.

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MEMORANDUM: STRATEGIC STABILITY AND ARMS CONTROL IN A TRIPOLAR NUCLEAR WORLD: "ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK"

For Russia, it is crucial to have nuclear parity with the United States while preserving the core benefit of ceilings that Russia can afford. However, given the abovementioned, ongoing developments of new delivery systems, which Russia has prioritized highly, freedom to mix force structure is expected to be of much value for Russia. Focusing solely on the number of deployed warheads in a trilateral arms control agreement, would also carry weight for Russia as this would only recognize China as a nuclear peer to a certain extent.

In sum, the ZOPA seems to be in the range of 1600 to perhaps 2000 deployed warheads. This would make a new trilateral arms control treaty close to the parameters of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) from 2002, where Russia and the United States agreed to reduce their deployed strategic arsenals to 1,700-2,200 warheads each by the end of 2012. Moreover, as highlighted in Article I of that treaty, each party was free to "determine for itself the composition and structure of its strategic offensive arms, based on the established aggregate limit for the number of such warheads."

Conclusion

While major political, strategic, and perceptual obstacles remain, this analysis suggests that a trilateral arms control framework involving the United States, Russia, and China is possible. By grounding negotiations in the tested principle of numerical equivalence and defining realistic reservation values, a tentative Zone of Possible Agreement emerges in the range of 1,600–2,000 deployed strategic warheads. Such parameters would preserve deterrence stability, accommodate China's growth trajectory, and sustain parity between Russia and the United States. Although bridging mutual mistrust will require targeted and sustained efforts, a trilateral framework based on parity and flexibility could form a pragmatic foundation for a new era of strategic restraint.

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