

NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL: A YEAR IN REVIEW

By
Ghazala Yasmin Jalil
Research Fellow

Arms Control & Disarmament Centre, ISSI

Edited by
Malik Qasim Mustafa

February 19, 2024

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Every year the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists sets its Dooms Day Clock signifying how close the world is to a nuclear catastrophe. In January 2024 they announced it at 90 seconds to midnight.¹ In 2023, they moved it from 100 seconds to midnight to 90 seconds to midnight. This essentially means that the world is still perilously close to a nuclear conflict. This may be a good time to assess how nuclear non-proliferation has fared in 2023. The year 2023 saw a further erosion in the nuclear arms control regime. The last decade has seen a resurgence of major power rivalry. Relations between the U.S. and Russia have deteriorated. The U.S. has come to view China's rise as a threat and is embroiled in strategic competition with the latter. Arms control has fallen victim to the major power rivalry and their ambitions to achieve military and strategic domination of the earth and the heavens.

New START Suspension

The biggest blow to arms control in the year 2023 came from the suspension of the New START treaty between the U.S. and Russia. In February 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia is suspending its participation in the New START treaty, which is the last remaining arms control treaty between Russia and the U.S., negotiated in 2010, puts a cap on the number of

¹ "The Dooms Day Clock," <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/>.

deployed warheads and delivery systems by both countries. It limits each side to 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads deployed on 700 strategic delivery systems and deployed and non-deployed launchers to 800. Russia emphasized that it had suspended the treaty, not withdrawn from it, and that it would continue to respect the caps on nuclear weapons under the treaty. Although Russia has stopped all information sharing with the U.S. under the treaty, Moscow said it will continue to give the U.S. advance notice on missiles it tests in line with a 1988 U.S.-Soviet Union agreement.

Tensions on New START had been brewing for a while with both sides alleging that the other has been in breach of the treaty. Russia was concerned that the U.S. did not modify or convert 56 Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile launchers and 41 B-52H Stratofortress bombers from nuclear to conventional roles, that were required to fall within the treaty's limits. Earlier, in 2022, Russia prohibited inspections of its nuclear weapons-related facilities after the U.S. sent a notification of plans to inspect the New START stipulation. Thus, in February 2023, the U.S. announced that Russia had failed to comply with New START, which was followed by Russia's suspension of the treaty.² In the past, Russia was an ardent supporter of New START and actively lobbied for its renewal for five years in February 2021, while the U.S. dragged its feet on the matter. The treaty was salvaged at the last moment when the Biden administration came to office. However, the Ukraine conflict proved to be the last nail in the New START coffin whereby both sides lost trust in each other and the will to cooperate on arms control. This bodes ill for the U.S.-Russia arms control and global non-proliferation. Without any arms control arrangements, the two sides would be free to field unlimited strategic warheads and launchers. Arms races may see new heights since the end of the Cold War.

Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty De-ratification

The second biggest blow to arms control is the Russian de-ratification of CTBT. On October 6, 2023, Russia declared its intention to de-ratify the treaty in an attempt to mirror the U.S. The treaty, which banned nuclear weapons tests, was opened for signature in September 1996, and has been signed by 187 nations and ratified by 177.³ Russia ratified the treaty in 2000 and was an ardent supporter of the nuclear test ban. The U.S. has signed the CTBT but has not ratified it. The treaty cannot enter into force until it is ratified by 44 specific nations which possess nuclear power and research reactors as determined by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Nine of the 44 states must still

² "START Treaty: Russia stops sending Nuclear Arms Info to US," *Al Jazeera*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/30/start-treaty-russia-stops-sending-nuclear-arms-info-to-us>.

³ "Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/test-ban-treaty-at-a-glance#:~:text=The%20Comprehensive%20Test%20Ban%20Treaty,nations%20and%20ratified%20by%20177.>

ratify for the Treaty to enter into force. Nonetheless, it has established a global norm against nuclear testing that has served as a hurdle to horizontal and vertical nuclear proliferation. The CTBT is another victim of the unraveling of arms control in recent years and reflects the deteriorating relations between the U.S. and Russia.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: No Progress

There has been no progress on the agenda of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) for years. The NPT Review Conference in August 2023 also underscored deep fissures over the implementation of key treaty obligations, differences between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states over disarmament and deterrence, and simmering disputes about nuclear weapons-sharing arrangements.⁴ There was no formal summary document issued at the end of the conference. Progress on NPT has been deadlocked for years and is likely to remain so in the foreseeable future.

Ukraine Conflict

Ukraine conflict that has raged for two years has caused a rise in the nuclear temperatures between Russia, the U.S., and NATO. In an escalatory move, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced in March 2023 that it would station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus,⁵ which shares borders with Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, all of which are members of NATO. The weapons stationing in Belarus started in June 2023, and was condemned by NATO, and the EU. Meanwhile, Belarus is amending its military doctrine, permitting the use of nuclear weapons.⁶

While the unraveling of the U.S.-Russia arms control arrangements started a long while back with the U.S. abrogating the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, the Ukraine conflict has hastened the process. The U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability dialogue is in limbo. The last remaining bilateral treaty, the New START, is also in jeopardy now. If it is not renewed in February 2026, and both parties do not reverse suspension, this last arms control arrangement will fade away, and with it any hopes of restraint in arms development by the major powers.

⁴ Gabriela Iveliz Rosa Hernández, Jupiter Kaishu Huang, and Daryl Kimball, "NPT Meeting Underscores Chronic Divisions," Arms Control Association, September 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-09/news/npt-meeting-underscores-chronic-divisions>.

⁵ Russia to put Nukes in Belarus near NATO Borders, envoy says," *Al Jazeera*, April 3, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/3/russia-to-put-nukes-in-belarus-near-nato-borders-envoy-says>.

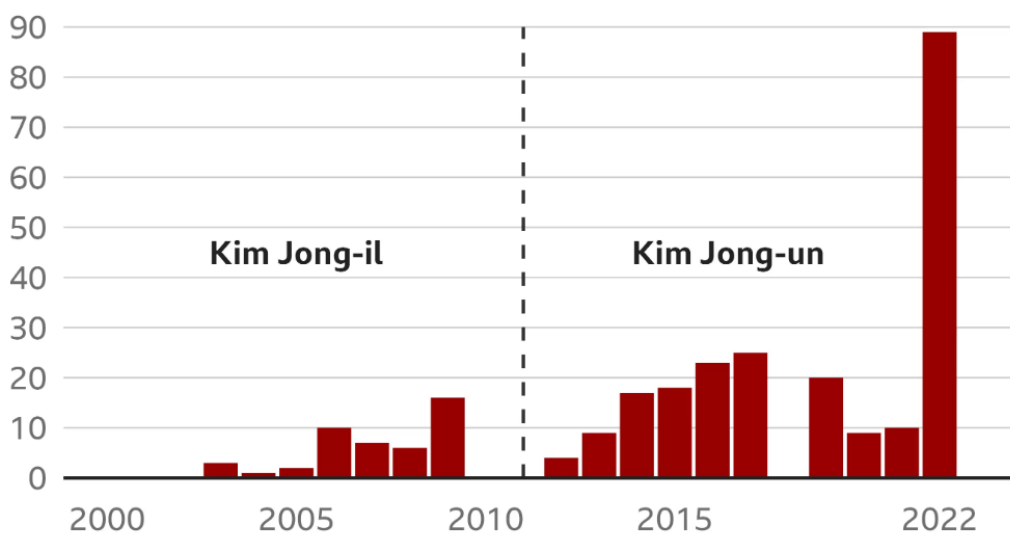
⁶ "Belarus adopts New Military Doctrine involving Nuclear Weapons," *CNN*, January 30, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/19/europe/belarus-adopts-doctrine-involving-nuclear-weapons-intl-hnk/index.html>.


North Korea Nuclear Program

Meanwhile, North Korea continues to conduct missile tests and even an underwater drone. According to the U.S. government sources, North Korea has conducted over 80 ballistic missile test launches since 2022.⁷ It has developed short, medium, and even Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. It is developing ballistic missile capability designed to defeat missile defence systems. The U.S. and South Korea continue their joint exercises, which threaten North Korea. While the Trump administration tried to engage with Pyongyang to discuss denuclearization, the Biden administration has made no such moves. As a result, North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile program. Tensions on the Korean Peninsula persist with North and South Korea relations at their worst in years.

North Korea missile launches peak in 2022

Number of missiles launched by North Korean forces, by year



Source: South Korean and Japanese defence ministries (data to 2 Jan 2023) 

Iran Nuclear Programme

In 2018, President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and several world powers, including the U.S. The JCPOA placed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. There have been several rounds of talks where the U.S. and Iran have both said they would return to the original deal, but they disagree on the steps to get there. In 2023, there was no progress on issues related to Iran's nuclear program. Any hopes of revival of JCPOA when the U.S. President Joe Biden took over have

⁷ "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs," Congressional Research Service, In Focus, December 19, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10472>.

been dashed. Iran has resumed uranium enrichment and has not been complying with IAEA inspections.

Positive Developments

In such a bleak arms control landscape there are only a few positive developments. On the positive side, there have been arms control talks between the U.S. and China in November 2023. According to the State Department, “the United States highlighted the need to promote stability, help avert an unconstrained arms race, and manage competition so that it does not veer into conflict.”⁸ The Chinese Foreign Ministry said the “two sides had an in-depth, candid and constructive exchange of views” on nuclear weapons matters, as well as an exchange on “regular arms control.” While there was not much substance in the meeting, it was a positive first step.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) has two new signatories São Tomé and Príncipe in January 2024, and Sri Lanka in September 2023. The TPNW is an agreement to ban nuclear weapons, opened for signature at the United Nations in New York on September 20, 2017, and entered into force on January 22, 2021. Currently, it has 93 signatories and 70 state parties⁹ but none of the nuclear weapons states support the treaty.

Conclusion

The unraveling of arms control is a continuation of a trend in the last decade or so to dispense with formal arms control treaties, a refusal to negotiate any new meaningful treaties, and to replace them with a “normative” approach manifested in initiatives like Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative,¹⁰ launched by the US in 2019. The decline of arms control has been accompanied by a renewed focus by major powers on developing nuclear weapons, a race in hypersonic missile development, Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications in arms development, emerging technologies, and a race in space-based offensive systems, which are eroding security and nuclear deterrence. Russia and the U.S. together possess over 90 percent of all nuclear weapons. With no arms control arrangements in place, and an increasing rivalry between the U.S. and China these stockpiles would grow. A nuclear arms race, combined with a hypersonic missile race, an AI race, and a space weapons race would have devastating effects on global security. This is the time

⁸ Daryl Kimball, “The US and China Re-engage on Arms Control what may come next?” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, November 19, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/11/the-us-and-china-re-engage-on-arms-control-what-may-come-next/>.

⁹ “TPNW Signature and Ratification Status,” https://www.icanw.org/signature_and_ratification_status.

¹⁰ It focused on creating conditions where states’ relations are not driven by competition but are cooperative and free from conflict. It also promotes best practices and creates awareness of issues instead of following hard rules codified by international treaties.

when arms control arrangements must be promoted, rather than abrogating existing treaties. Today, the world is faced with a greater existential challenge like climate change. Humanity must come together to tackle the challenge and must stop investing in armaments.