



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The end of New START—nuclear policy without oversight



In February 2026, the last remaining strategic **nuclear arms reduction treaty** between the United States and Russia will expire.

New START, signed in 2010, provides a framework that precisely defines the number of deployed warheads and the systems that carry them.

When it expires, the world will, for the first time in more than half a century, be without a mechanism to limit the arsenals of the two most significant nuclear powers.

The treaty set three key limits: a maximum of 1,550 deployed **warheads**, 700 deployed launchers, and 800 total deployed and non-deployed systems.

These limits are not abstract figures but the foundation of strategic stability, relying on inspections and data sharing.

New START was not a treaty based on trust but on verification. Its strength lay not in political statements, but in the daily mechanisms of control: inspections, data sharing, and precise commitments that enabled each side to know the status of the other.

New START has been extended once, until 5 February 2026. That date is now less than four months away, and there are no negotiations on a new agreement or a temporary extension.

On 22 September, Moscow proposed that both sides maintain the current **arms limits** for another year after their expiration, subject to mutual consent. The United States did not respond.

Russia claims that it still respects the central provisions of the treaty but does not allow inspections, as it believes they have become an instrument of political pressure.

Regardless of formal statements, the verification system is effectively defunct. From 2023, **field inspections** were suspended, and communication about missile tests was reduced to a minimum. In a technical sense,

the treaty now exists only on paper.

What does the world lose without New START?

Without verification, there is no transparency. Without transparency, the risk of misjudgement increases. In such an environment, each side assumes that the other is increasing its arsenal, testing new systems, or redeploying forces.

Strategic planning becomes trapped in a cycle of doubt. This does not mean a new arms race will immediately follow, but it does mean that nothing will prevent one from starting.

European states will depend exclusively on American assessments and decisions

Europe has particular cause for concern. While the war in Ukraine continues and NATO-Russia relations remain deadlocked, the disappearance of the arms control treaty further reduces the scope for political manoeuvres.

In practice, European states will depend exclusively on American assessments and decisions, without their own insight into strategic dynamics.

For Russia, it creates the possibility of using nuclear potential as an instrument of pressure, and for NATO, an incentive to strengthen the nuclear presence in Eastern Europe. Both options carry risks.

American dilemmas

There are three competing approaches in Washington. The first holds that a new treaty cannot be negotiated without involving China. Another argues that it is better to maintain the bilateral framework and renew verification with Moscow without conditions.

The third suggests not hurrying – to let the treaty expire and only then observe how the Russian side behaves. All three options have serious weaknesses.

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The involvement of China is politically attractive but unrealistic. **Beijing** does not wish to accept restrictions and inspections that would place it in the same category as the US and Russia.

Retaining the existing bilateral model faces deep distrust in Congress, where any deal with Moscow is considered a concession. On the other hand, a delay could lead to the complete collapse of the verification regime, making a return impossible.

Russian position

Moscow is using the treaty crisis as evidence that the West is not prepared for serious dialogue. At the same time, it avoids formally announcing its withdrawal from the treaty, thus preserving room for manoeuvres.

Russia's proposal for a temporary extension of one year is not a concession but a tactical move that allows it to maintain the image of a responsible power at minimal cost.

The Russian approach is pragmatic: to maintain the formal structure without its substance

Moscow's realistic objective is to restore communication channels without making concessions on Ukraine and without resuming inspections that would restrict its freedom of action.

In this respect, the Russian approach is

pragmatic: to maintain the formal structure without its substance.

Europe between fear and powerlessness

European governments do not have a direct role in the negotiations, but their interests are the greatest. If arms control collapses, NATO will increase nuclear exercises and deploy additional forces in Poland and the Baltic states.

Russia will respond by strengthening its presence in Kaliningrad and the Arctic.



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Both sides will claim these measures are defensive, but in practice this will mark a new phase of nuclear tension on the continent.

Without New START, Europe no longer has a means to slow the pace of this escalation. This is especially dangerous at a time when communication between Moscow and NATO exists only through military channels.

What is realistically possible?

The most realistic outcome at this stage would be a temporary technical arrangement that maintains the existing restrictions for a while longer, with a basic level of data sharing and test notification.

Such an agreement could be reached without ratification or a formal protocol, but it would need to be accompanied by the actual implementation of commitments, not merely political statements.

The second, less favourable scenario is complete silence – the formal end of the contract without a replacement framework.

New START is more than a numbers treaty; it is the habit of two powers operating within a predictable system

In that case, both sides would claim to be "staying within the frameworks", but the absence of inspections and data would render any statements irrelevant.

In such an environment, an incident, misjudgement, or technical error could trigger a crisis much larger than the one we face today.

New START is more than a numbers treaty; it is the habit of two powers operating within a predictable system. If this habit vanishes, it will result in the loss of the final mechanism that controls the speed and scope of decisions.

The absence of control may not immediately lead to an increase in arsenals, but it fundamentally changes the nature of the relationship between the powers. When verification disappears, predictability ceases.

Instead of data, there are estimates; instead of surveillance, there are assumptions. In such an environment, stability becomes temporary, and a misjudgement is sufficient to cause conflict. Because in international security, the unknown is most often what triggers disaster.