

## The Impact of Trumpism on Global Nuclear Nonproliferation

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### ABSTRACT

For decades, global nonproliferation measures have provided strategic stability to control the proliferation of nuclear weapons to ensure international security and peace. However, the rise of Trumpism has signalled a significant shift in US foreign policy from multi-lateral liberalism to interest-driven policy. Donald Trump with his unilateralism, isolationism and transaction diplomacy have far-reaching effects on longstanding global nuclear nonproliferation and arms control frameworks. By utilising qualitative research methodology and secondary data sources, this article examines Trump's policy impact on significant case studies: The Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), East Asia (Japan, south and north Korea) security dynamics, and strategic competition between US, Russia and China. The research highlights the effect of the US withdrawal from key agreements has created on the strategic instability and nuclear tensions among states. The findings of the research indicates that the shift from a collaborative nuclear diplomacy towards interest driven diplomacy might threaten to undermine existing nuclear norms, raise tensions in regions and intensified strategic rivalry among the US, Russia and China.

### 1. Introduction

Every state's ultimate goal in the international arena is survival and to achieve that, states will concentrate on

security above all. In the modern world the possession of nuclear weapons is often considered the ultimate assurance of security and guarantee of survival. These weapons are considered the most powerful



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tools of destruction ever created by mankind; capable of destroying entire cities in seconds. To combat the destructive nature of nuclear weapons, international nonproliferation frameworks were established. According to a joint declaration released by US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, "A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" (Feaver, 2024). Throughout the decades, States have recognised the importance of nonproliferation on the international stage through a number of accords and actions. The non-proliferation system has always depended on international co-operation and multilateral diplomacy.

Initiatives like the Atoms for Peace Program, Partial Test Ban Treaty (1963), International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Treaty on the Non-Proliferation Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I & II), Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), New START, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaties, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) amongst others were instrumental to maintain the international nuclear order (Eisenhower, 1953). Additional global treaties such as the Outer Space Treaty and the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions broadened the framework of international arms control (Ullah, 2020). These treaties ensured systems of verification, transparency and confidence building between states which contributed to global stability. The United States led the way in creating and implementing non-proliferation regimes, with both strategic aims as well as a sense of hegemonic responsibility to keep the peace in the world.

The world's security dynamics of the twenty-first century are quite more complex than that of the twentieth. The 9/11 attacks, the rise of China as a major world power, US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific, the evolving US-Russia-China strategic triangle, the Ukraine-Russia war, the Gaza conflict and the gradual drift of states towards acquiring nuclear weapons suggest an

international system prone to errors and escalation. Humanity has arrived at a point again where new and reliable structures are needed to prevent mass violence. Within this changing context of the world, the United States foreign policy posture shifted significantly (Feaver, 2024). The state is governed by populist-nationalist leaders, whose political views are shaped by an ideology known as "Trumpism." Trumpism is a unique brand of right-wing populism that is a mix of nationalism, protectionism, anti-globalization, and anti-elitism that includes redrawing the traditional government institutions and political agendas.

During the presidency of Donald J. Trump (first term 2017-2021, second term 2025-2029), US foreign policy witnessed a dramatic break from its decade-long commitment to multilateralism and cooperated arms control norms. The administration's scepticism towards international treaties, as well as a preference for unilateral or transactional approach caused difficulties to existing global non-proliferation framework. Trump's foreign policy prioritized realpolitik, emphasizing economic and security over normative goals. Such ideals raised serious concerns about the US's commitment to human rights, signaling a departure from the liberal democratic values. Trump's "America first" rhetoric emphasizes that the US has overextended itself globally while neglecting domestic security needs (Drezner, 2019).

Despite having a history of long reliance on multilateral institutions to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, the Trump administration's tilt towards unilateralism has destabilized existing strategic stability measures. The withdrawal from important arms control agreements together with criticism of allies have raised questions about the United States commitment to global nuclear governance. This poses an important question, how did Trump's unilateralism alter regional nuclear behaviour and great power strategic competition?

## 2. Background of the Study

In 1945, The atomic bombs attack on Hiroshima

and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, revealed the horrific power of nuclear weapons. The use of nuclear technology for military purposes changed the global security dynamics radically. Following two horrible global battles, World War I and World War II and survival being the ultimate goal for every state, the acquisition of nuclear weapons soon became synonymous with security and deterrence. The world became incredibly worried about the prospect of nuclear war (Cirincione, 2007). Following the United States, other great nations quickly developed their own nuclear arsenal, including the Soviet Union in 1949, the United Kingdom in 1952, France in 1960 and China in 1964.

In 1953 US President Dwight D Eisenhower established the Atoms for Peace program, realizing that nuclear energy could be both deadly and used to develop energy for peaceful purposes. The initiative aimed to encourage peaceful uses of nuclear technology and at the same time forbid the use of nuclear technology for military purposes. In order to contribute to this goal, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was established in 1957 to provide technical assistance and to monitor nuclear operations in order to ensure they meet the criteria for peaceful use (Mallard, 2014).

During the Cold War, the increasing arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, created unprecedented dangers. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 which exposed the dangers of unfettered nuclear competition, Washington and Moscow began to discuss the ideas of arms control regimes to prevent arms escalation. This resulted in a number of important treaties, such as the NPT (1968), SALT I in 1972 and SALT II in 1979, the INF treaty in 1987, START I and II and, in turn, the New Start deal in 2010 (Walker, 2004). These agreements limited nuclear arsenals, established verification systems, and reduced the potential for outright war between superpowers. The United States superheated the creation and implementation of these nonproliferation regimes

As new regional nuclear issues came to play, post-

Cold War optimism waned. In 1998, India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests, re-introducing the problem of severe strategic instability in South Asia. North Korea's successful nuclear test in 2006 revealed the limits of the international nonproliferation effort, and Israel's much-rumored nuclear arsenal continued to shape the security situation in the Middle East. Iran's advancing nuclear program has also become a huge diplomatic challenge.

Collectively, these developments pointed to a bigger pattern: nuclear constraint was no longer supported by the leadership of the great powers, which had kept it going for decades. Instead, Trump's scepticism about international treaties, and his sense of international alliances of unrestricted obligations on the US, undermined international faith in weapons control and extended deterrence. As a result, the ramifications in the long term go far beyond any short-term diplomatic problems affecting the verification regime and destabilizing the global nonproliferation system.

### 3. Research Objectives

The objective of this article is to examine the effect of the Trump administrations on the nuclear nonproliferation and arms control framework. This article analyzes the impact of the United States withdrawal from the JCPOA on Iran's nuclear program. It further discusses Trump's rhetorical influence on South Korea and Japan's nuclear ambition and East Asia's security dynamics. The research also determines the retreat of the INF Treaty, as well as the shifting nuclear landscape between China and Russia.

### 4. Research Methodology

The article utilizes qualitative approaches to analyze the effect of Trump's foreign policies on nuclear proliferation measures and arms control agreements in an evolving global order. The study employs discourse analysis, case studies, and document analysis to assess Trump's foreign policy statements and decision making. The research secondary data sources for an in-depth review. Secondary sources include academic books, international relations journals, academic

papers, research theses, media reports, expert analysis, think tank reports, opinion pieces and news coverage. The methodology is selected to thoroughly explain how global nuclear nonproliferation frameworks are affected by Trumpism.

## 5. Research Limitations

The article is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the study is widely based on secondary sources which might have biases based on the political connection of the referenced sources or researcher's regional opinion. Second, the research associates numerous global phenomena with Trumpism, which may compromise research ethics by introducing personal opinions, as structural and long-standing geopolitical factors also contribute to such developments. Lastly, the broader scope of this research may have restricted the level of detail within each thematic area.

## 6. Literature Review

The Cold War established the foundation for the existing nuclear nonproliferation and arms control system. Key treaties such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), have been key in the attempts to reduce the spread of nuclear weapons. In the paper "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb" Scott Sagan describes how the NPT has been establishing the norms inhibiting proliferation; however, its basic defects and lack of implementation machinery make it susceptible to political upheavals (Sagan, 1996). Similarly, Potter, W. C., and Mukhatzhanova, G. in their article "Nuclear Politics and the Non-Aligned Movement: Principles vs Pragmatism," write that, while the NPT framework has been successful in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons to a large extent, its skewed nature is advantageous to recognized nuclear states and this continues to breed suspicion among non-nuclear nations (Potter & Mukhatzhanova, 2012).

During the presidency of Donald Trump, significant shifts happened that undermined these weapons control mechanisms that had been established. Motamedi, in "US Withdrawal from

JCPOA: Strategic Implications and Diplomatic Fallout" explained that the US withdrawal of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has been a massive setback to multilateral diplomacy and world faith in American leadership. This episode was a watershed moment in what Motutils-wing sees as a greater move towards unilateralism (Motamedi, 2023).

Uri Friedman argues in "America's Withdrawal from the World" that Trump's foreign policy that was described as the "America First" concept was a departure from global cooperation and a transactional approach to diplomacy. This renunciation of institutional commitments led to a dislocated international security setting and to a lack of credibility of nuclear pacts. The collapse of the INF Treaty is a heavy loss to the global disarmament efforts (Friedman, 2019). In his book "Weapons of Mass Destruction and International Order", William Walker points out the demand for continued cooperation and confidence in effective weapons control arrangements. Two aspects were significantly disregarded under the Trump administration. He highlights the need to guard against these institutional frameworks, such as that of the NPT, being eroded and thus become mere symbols and not deterrents (Walker, 2004). Similarly, Joseph Nye, in "Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump" argues that moral leadership by the president, trust-building and reciprocity in diplomacy are essential to maintaining international weapons limitation treaties all of which were largely disregarded throughout Trump's presidency (Nye, 2020).

For global geopolitics, Daniel Drezner, in his article published in 2020 "The Toddler in Chief: What Donald Trump Teaches Us About the Modern Presidency," believes that Trump's unpredictable leadership and disregard of multi-lateral organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and United Nations have thrown disrupted crucial international alliances. Drezner thinks that these shifts have weakened the collective diplomatic resources needed to fight the nuclear threats (Drezner, 2020). Furthermore, Kingston Reif breaks down in his book "The

Unraveling of Arms Control: The Trump Administration's Legacy" published in 2020, how the Trump administration willfully avoided arms control programs such as talks on reducing strategic weapons without offering possible solutions to it. Reif points out that these measures undermine international law and make people less willing to make diplomatic efforts on nuclear questions (Reif, 2020)

Although numerous scholars have explained Trump's effect on non-proliferation yet, there is still a significant gap in the literature. This research article aims to fill that gap by providing in-depth detailed analysis of the three different cases: JCPOA, East Asia and Super power competition between the USA, Russia and China.

## 7. Theoretical Framework

### 7.1 Offensive Realism

Offensive realism is a structural approach to international affairs that is based on the realist school of thought. "John Joseph Mearsheimer" is an American political scientist and an expert on international relations who formulated this idea. The theory states that the absence of central controlling power leads to the situation of lawlessness. Encourage governments to operate in a "self-help" environment where survival is of the utmost concern. Mearshiemer saw world politics as a zero-sum game. Gains for one state are seen as losses to others. This is a competitive environment which keeps the states in constant search for power (Mearsheimer, 2001).

### 7.2 Relevance of the Theory to the Topic

Offensive realism provides a structural understanding of Trump's foreign policy actions, especially the US's withdrawal from arms control agreements such as the JCPOA and the INF Treaty (Taliaferro, 2000). Through an offensive realism viewpoint, Trump's unilateralism, emphasis on military maximization and rejection of multilateral restrictions highlights a worldview the US must maximise its relative power, to survive in an anarchic international system. Treaties that constrain the range of missiles, limit its nuclear weapons are considered strategic handicaps,

especially when competitor states such as China and Russia update their arsenals without being subject to these limits (Toft, 2020). Trump's quest for unfettered power, favouring unilateral actions, and preference for competitive advantage over mutual constraint are all consistent with Mearsheimer's argument that major powers pursue hegemony in order to reduce their vulnerability. Thus, the offensive realism lens helps explain how Trumpism short term security concerns are affecting long-standing arms control agreements that will ultimately result in a decline of global non-proliferation stability (Meier, 2019). This decline will not only result in the rise of nuclear competition in regions such as the Middle East and East Asia but also start a new era of arms race between Russia, USA and China.

## 8. Trump's Nuclear Policies and the Global Security Landscape

During his administration, Donald Trump meant for U.S. national security four major challenges: North Korea's nuclear weapons program development, the rapid increase in military and technological power by China, Russia's rising geopolitical commitment, and Iran's development of nuclear power. Trump's grand plan, guided by a mostly zero-sum mindset, made different policy instruments available for solving each of these perceived challenges. These weapons comprised maximal economic and diplomatic pressure, military signalling unilateral withdrawals from accords and the renegotiation of long-term commitments. However, the results of these techniques often were not as the administration had intended, working with mixed or counterproductive results. This section focuses on Trump's attitude to the nuclear program of Iran, considers his strategic responses to China and Russia, and assesses to what extent his changing security pledges have reshaped the strategic environment in East Asia.

### 8.1 Trump's JCPOA withdrawal and Risk of Nuclear Iran

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was the result of a major diplomatic effort by then U.S. President Barack Obama to contain Iran's

rapid nuclear expansion. By 2013, Tehran was dangerously close to developing its nuclear weapon, threatening both the global nonproliferation framework and the stability in the Middle East. The international community imposed economic sanctions to financially pressure Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions but these sanctions were proven unsuccessful. Realising that coercive measures would not lead to long-term restraint, a global diplomatic approach was selected by the Obama administration (2008-2016). This culminated with the JCPOA which was negotiated with the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, Germany and the European Union. It set up a balanced framework, whereby sanctions relief would be given in exchange for Iran's commitment to scale back, limit and monitor the key elements of its nuclear program (Al Jazeera, 2018). This multilateral approach to a sensitive security issue was widely considered one of Obama's most important diplomatic achievements.

On 8th May, 2018, President Donald Trump decided to withdraw the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Trump gave an executive order in the White House, canceling membership of the United States of America into Iran's Nuclear Deal, explaining that "the JCPOA gave Iran a clear path to nukes". This decision caused an enormous international condemnation and raised concerns of nuclear proliferation. Trump justified his decision based on a view that the JCPOA did not adequately set restrictions for Iran to limit nuclear ambitions, describing the endeavour as "the worst deal ever" (Al Jazeera, 2018).

### 8.1.1 Maximum Pressure Strategy and the Path to Regional War

Guided by zero sum game strategy, Trump initiated a "Maximum Pressure" policy, imposing unprecedented sanctions and a set of unreasonable demands on Iran. The stated objective of the policy was to end Iran's nuclear threat and make Iran give up support for regional proxy organisations such as Houthis, Huzebulah, Hamas, and ISIS. Trump believes that, just like the

oil resources, ISIS will also acquire nuclear technology from Iran. The results for Tehran were very harsh, the Iranian economy suffered a dramatic collapse due to the loss of oil revenues and financial limitations (IISS, 2019).

The tension between Tehran and Washington fostered more when Iraqi General Qassem Soleimani was killed and two US tankers were seized by Iran in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman, to which Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly questioned the need of having nuclear weapons. The leader stated the acquisition of a nuclear weapon is the only guarantee of Iran's existence and security in the Middle East (Isfahani, 2024). Analysis shows that the "Maximum Pressure" strategy was much more of a provocation than a deterrence. Iran responded to the pressure by expanding their nuclear program in areas beyond the JCPOA set out guidelines and also heightening destabilising efforts in the area.

Iran's nuclear ambitions have always been deemed by Israel an existential threat. Tel Aviv has threatened, if Iran achieves weapons capabilities, it will carry out pre-emptive military action (Motamedi, 2023). This has led to a dramatic rise in hostilities on a number of fronts, with Iran-backed militias in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Iran's nuclear programme's facilities, like Natanz, Fordow and Uranium Conversion Facility in Esfahan, has been the subject of concern in the region with sophisticated enrichment centrifuges being fitted at these locations (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025). Iranian proliferation threats are further compounded by hidden subterranean facilities, such as tunnel complexes near Esfahan, which may house parts of stocks of highly enriched uranium (HEU) and will make it harder to monitor in case of a catastrophic failure of international verification.

The strategic environment took a quite negative turn in June 2025, when the Israel-Iran dispute escalated into a full-fledged war, radically changing the regional calculations and putting a much higher probability of escalation. During the battle, Israel planes, apparently refuelled and

logistically supported by the US, targeted nuclear, military and energy targets all over Iran. Iran's response was huge barrages of missiles to Israeli cities, US bases in the Gulf, and infrastructure in the region.

### 8.1.2 Deterrence, Retaliation, and the New Nuclear Dilemma in the Middle East

In early June 2025, the United States launched a series of synchronised military strikes against Iran in reaction to Iranian attacks on US installations in Iraq and the Gulf using missiles. Although Washington initially defined the operation as "limited deterrent strikes," it slowly grew. US troops targeted Iraqi air defence networks, the IRGC missile regiments, fortified launch locations, and command and control centres. Strikes hit the Khorramabad missile site, the IRGC Aerospace Force headquarters outside Tehran, the Bandar Abbas radar nodes and Hormozgan subterranean storage dumps (*Al Jazeera Staff, 2025*). US cyber teams simultaneously impacted Iran communications and radar systems indicating a planned cooperative electronic warfare component (Faude & Wild, 2025).

This was the first direct large-scale US strike on Iranian land in decades, which managed to reduce Iran's missile capability, but resulted in a greater escalation. Tehran retaliated with ballistic and cruise missile strikes against US assets in Al Udeid (Qatar), Al Dhafra (UAE), and Ain al-Asad (Iraq) and brought things to the brink of interstate conflict. These strikes reinforced the idea in Iran's national security establishment that the only way to prevent further external aggression was through a nuclear deterrent, and Iran rapidly came to its nuclear thinking about strike.

The fact that Iran's regional allies and their own conventional arsenal were inadequate to prevent persistent Israeli and US strikes provided great incentive to develop nuclear weapons as the ultimate form of deterrent. In July 2025, Iran's President issued a decree on suspending all cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a new age of hostility was born.

The IAEA then said that it had "lost continuity of

knowledge in relation to the current inventories of nuclear material in Iran, including low enriched uranium (LEU) and high enriched uranium (HEU)," leading to an emergency of proliferation with no authority to oversee. As of June 2025, just before the outbreak of war conflict, Iran possessed about 440.9kg (U mass) of uranium enriched to 60% U-235, which it classified as a "serious concern" in the eyes of the IAEA. With inspectors not allowed into any major facility, including Natanz, Fordow and now enrichment at a new facility in Esfahan, the international monitors suspect that Iran may have moved much of its HEU stocks into the Esfahan tunnel complex, where its intentions are hidden and it makes it difficult to verify them (*Albright et al, 2024*).

This comes after a previous collapse of monitoring capabilities: since 2021, once Tehran ceased to comply with the Additional Protocol, the IAEA had already lost track of production of centrifuges (including IR-6 rotor and bellows manufacturing), heavy water stocks, and uranium ore concentrate (UOC). These deficiencies have led to an irreversible intelligence blind hole, where the international community has no idea the scope, pace and location of Iran's nuclear advance (*Albright et al, 2024*).

This decline in openness has given regional governments a shake. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt have publicly expressed their desire to pursue independent nuclear programs as well, if Iran does reach the nuclear threshold. The Trump administration's inability to deal with Iran's nuclear program has worsened these proliferation tendencies. If Iran gains access to nuclear weapons, there would be far greater potential for mistakes, unintentional attacks or nuclear exchange with Israel, which may result in a larger geopolitical disaster. Rather than strengthening the US legacy, Trump's strategy might have hastened nuclear competition, threatened regional stability, and broken down the global non-proliferation system.

### 8.2 The Crisis over Extended Deterrence in East Asia

In East Asia, the most imminent security concern

is not just the nuclear program of North Korea, but also the rising danger that South Korea and Japan would pursue their own nuclear weapons. The "America First" agenda of the Trump administration alarms both allies about the reliability of US security commitments and nuclear umbrella. South Korea and Japan have long used US deterrence for survival and security. As the primary goal of every state is their survival, growing doubt over Washington's commitments may revive the realisation within both countries about the independent nuclear options.

South Korea's nuclear ambitions can be traced back to the Korean War (1950-53) and resurfaces, many times during a high level of inter-Korean animosity. Japan, whilst being traditionally limited by its pacifist constitution, is being faced with similar problems as the security situation becomes increasingly dangerous (Condon, 2016). In 1977, Seoul made an attempt to make nuclear weapons but abandoned these efforts under US pressure and military commitments. Japan, on the other hand, was provided a nuclear umbrella by the US after the end of WW II in a form of security guarantee in return for not developing its own nuclear weapons. However, under the Trump Administration, the debate on US military obligations is a topic of discussion. Trump raises the questions of the financial implications of US protection for these states.

According to Trump, some allies such as Saudi Arabia, Japan and South Korea should consider building their own nuclear weapons. Trump asked the Republic of Korea to pay America \$10 billion a year for its defence and discussed publicly the evacuation of the 28,500 US soldiers stationed in South Korea. This conditionality approach of transactionalism attained "mistrust" and "abandonment fears" in Seoul and Tokyo. Deterrence credibility is very sensitive to the perceptions of consistency (INSS, 2021). By making the commitment conditional, the United States may have achieved short term political gain but at the expense of credibility in the long term. When the extended deterrence is treated as transactional, allies will build their nuclear weapons in order to ensure their own survival,

thereby alarming regional proliferation.

Unfortunately, Trump does not seem to anticipate these results. Trump believes that if Pakistan can have nuclear weapons, there is no reason why other US partners should not. Trump emphasises that the US cannot supply the permanent guarantees for security to its allies, and the acquisition of nuclear weapons is a viable alternative for all of these countries. According to Trump, "Japan and South Korea are rich countries." Why should America always pay their own defence? (Hannah et al., 2022). This shift in the United States approach serves as the basis for compelling arguments about the future of nuclear nonproliferation which American leaders have articulated with a picture of the catastrophic hazards posed by the presence of nuclear weapons.

During Trump's re-election in 2025, political expert Cheong Seong-Chang said that this is the perfect time for South Korea to develop a nuclear weapon. He said US security promises could become untrustworthy with increasing hostility between Washington and Seoul under Trump's government (Blatt, 2023).

### **US Policy, North Korea, and Regional Nuclear Risks**

Trump's attitude to North Korea was radically different. He started high-profile bilateral summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, on June 12, 2018, at the Capella Hotel in Sentosa, Singapore. Trump was the first US president to hold a meeting with a North Korean leader. While Trump had characterised these face to face meetings as stepping stones towards peace, they eventually created strategic benefits for Pyongyang without corresponding results towards denuclearisation (Zhao, 2024). During this time, Trump unilaterally canceled important US-South Korean joint military exercises in 2019, which he considered "tremendously expensive" and "inappropriate", a move that deeply alarmed Seoul by signalling a weakening of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. North Korea made much use of this unclear diplomatic position. Pyongyang proceeded to solidify its nuclear and

missile programs in spite of US reduced military pressure and undercut South Korea by casting doubt on its strength and durability of the US-ROK alliance. This led to a failure of dual deterrence where the enemy gained advantage and the ally lost trust.

South Korea has been insecure about North Korea's nuclear weapons; the state cannot always rely only on the US assistance in times of emergency. The cumulative effect of this uncertainty is driving a radical rethink in the security strategy of US allies. South Korea, a very sophisticated country with the economic and technical capacity to develop nuclear weapons, is witnessing an upsurge in domestic backing for the ability to match North Korea's nuclear capacity. Policy experts argue that persistent US resistance to South Korean nuclearisation appears to be more "self-serving," since Washington is pressuring Seoul to accept a degree of vulnerability with which the US would never be willing to accept itself.

Similarly, in Japan concerns about the credibility and long-term viability of US security promises are commonly held by policymakers. These concerns are leading to Japan considering alternative security arrangements such as acquiring long-range strike capabilities and developing ties with countries such as Australia and India. If South Korea begins to build nuclear weapons, Japan will almost undoubtedly be motivated to follow its lead. If both Koreas acquire nuclear weapons the risks of preemptive strikes or accidental launches and of nuclear war would be greatly heightened. Furthermore, the nuclear armed South Korea and Japan would start an arms race with China which would spread to India and then Pakistan. This "chain reaction" represents serious challenges to world peace and security (Bandow, 2025).

As Albert Einstein said, "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." The scientists who constructed the atomic bomb in the Manhattan Project were among the loudest in favor of the regulation of nuclear technology, due

to the realisation of the unmatched destructive capacity of the weapons. In contrast, Trump's permissive rhetoric seemed to ignore these historic lessons and the fundamental principles of non-proliferation, and suggested a dangerous change from decades of US nuclear restraint leadership.

### **8.3 The Trilemma and the Resurgence of Great Power Competition**

Donald Trump viewed China and Russia as the two most important strategic rivals of the US. He viewed them not only as the classic issue of security problems, but also as ideological and economic opponents who can compete with Western supremacy. Their growing alliance, political coordination, military cooperation and other alternative financial institutions, such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), challenged the US-led international order. Together, these states have stepped up an unofficial weapons race that will threaten global peace.

China's rapid development has been the biggest structural threat to US hegemony in the twenty-first century. Beijing has adopted an ambitious long-term strategy called Xi's national rejuvenation vision, whose objective is to turn China into a strong nation with the capacity to defend its territory, combine with the maritime resources in the South China Sea, and secure uninterrupted trade in the Indo-Pacific region. The "2030 modernization goals" which focus on building a world-class military and boosting China's strategic reach is an integral part of this strategy. China has greatly expanded its military and nuclear strength. It now has some 410 nuclear warheads, supported by an ever-increasing sophisticated complex of delivery systems based on land, air, and sea (Gadkari, 2021).

The growing rivalry between China and the United States has led to a weapons race in rapidly expanding areas, notably in the Indo-Pacific Ocean region. President Xi Jinping's strategic vision has included the establishment of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) which he has declared as a "strategic counterbalance" to

American military supremacy in the area. This modernisation has dramatically changed the balance of power, which has increased the tensions and increased possibilities of conflict between both states (Arms Control Association, 2025).

On the other hand, the competition between the United States and Russia can be traced back to the Cold War. This arms race between USA and USSR, resulted in the production of The Soviet Tsar Bomba (the most destructive weapon ever made), B41 thermonuclear bomb of the US, with a maximum yield of 25 megatons. This never stopping arms race eventually pushed both countries towards the use of arms control frameworks culminating in treaties such as SALT I & II and START. These treaties dismantled 40-45 % of both countries' stockpiles as well as placing restrictions on strategic weapon manufacturing.

However, according to Trump these arms-control agreements limit US strength and emboldened enemies. He argued that arms control agreements had destroyed America's military superiority and allowed enemies to build their abilities without restraint. On August 8, 2019, the US State Department officially announced the US withdrawal from the bilateral Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF treaty), which was signed in 1987 to ban ground-launched missiles. Trump justified his decision accusing Russia of violating the treaty by developing and deploying the banned SSC-8 (9M729) missile system (DSA, 2025). Although Russia's violation was a secondary concern, the basic geopolitical motivation for withdrawal was China. Because China never signed the INF treaty, that meant that they were free to build up their missile forces and nuclear powered submarines.

As China wanted to protect its trade routes and oppose US naval supremacy. Trump viewed this asymmetry as inexcusable. China responded strongly, with the Foreign Ministry accusing the US of having given up on the international frameworks that the US had promoted, ushering in a new age of strategic uncertainty. Trump's decision meant that his administration favoured

unilateral moves over cooperation security endeavours. Chinese analysts suggested that Trump's final ambition was to free the US from binding treaties so as to modernise its military and strategic capability.

### The New Nuclear Standoff

The weakening of the arms control system started with the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002, but the breaking of the INF put immediate strain on the remaining bilateral controls. Under Trump's second term, the United States has accelerated the development of its own intermediate-range missile weapons and the Typhon Medium Range Capability armament system in 2023. On August 5, 2023, President Vladimir Putin said that Russia will develop the same technologies and weapons as the US to maintain the strategic balance (Siddiqui & Reuters, 2025). Russia's response was to announce it would hold a tactical "moratorium" on deployment, if the US proceeded with its own deployments. The intention of this policy was to alienate America's allies and make the US look like the villain for killing the arms control treaty.

Trump's vision of negotiating a new trilateral deal further complicated the process of renewing the New START Treaty signed in 2010, which will expire in February 2026. The treaty remains the only verifiable and legally binding limit on deployed strategic nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia, its demise signals the start of a new age of nuclear competitiveness (Chappell, 2023). This weakening of the last barrier might accelerate the collapse of the nuclear nonproliferation system. In light of increased tensions between Moscow, Beijing and Washington, the Trump administration proposed the replacement of New START by a "bold new trilateral arms control initiative" with Russia and China (Reif & Bugos, 2020). In the absence of a clear and consistent plan for New START, there was wide-scale strategic uncertainty.

According to Mearshiemer, great powers are inherently selfish. States will form alliances as long as it serves their interest. Thus, Trump's strategic aim is not genuine trilateral cooperation, but

rather to use a binding agreement to constrain China's nuclear expansion while simultaneously imposing strong strategic limits on Russia, thereby, killing two birds with one stone. As Putin and Xi are aware of Trump's true ambitions, Putin stated that Russia will not extend the New START Treaty. On the other hand, Beijing repeatedly highlights that the US and Russian nuclear stockpiles exceed China's by an order of magnitude (Bugos, 2019). The state Beijing resisted participation in reduction agreements, unless the imbalance is reduced.

Recognising the political difficulties with China, Moscow then dropped its desire for trilateral discussions putting the diplomatic load mainly on Washington. The failure to include the world's third largest nuclear power in any verifiable limitations means that China's arsenal continues to grow fully outside of existing non proliferation standards. Paradoxically this failure validates the Chinese accelerated nuclear modernisation, encouraging the further deployment of missiles in the Pacific. These dynamics guarantee that the arm race will pick up pace simultaneously between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing.

### 6.3.3 Disarmament or Nuclear Arms Race

Under Project 2025, the Trump administration lobbied for the increase of the US defence budget to pay for military modernisation, including increased nuclear testing and the development of new strategic systems. According to him, "China and Russia are building up their nuclear arsenals while the US follows outdated agreements" (Ahlander, 2025). However, on the international stage, Trump called on Russia and China to form a trilateral arms limitation treaty, he simultaneously implemented strategies that intensified military tensions and increased the risk of nuclear proliferation. These policies create an atmosphere of strategic instability, encouraging rival powers to enhance their own nuclear capabilities as a defensive response (Sheng, 2025).

During the Cold War arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, both states built nuclear arsenals which could destroy the earth multiple times over. This serves as a clear

historical warning: prioritizing nuclear competition, ultimately guarantees catastrophic global destabilisation.

### 9. Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

The shifting nuclear diplomacy under the Trump administration marks a watershed moment from multilateral diplomacy to unilateral assertiveness with far reaching consequences for international security and the nonproliferation framework. The withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) did not just erase years of diplomatic advancements, but it was used as fuel for Iran's nuclear provocations and brought the Middle East dangerously close to a nuclear clash. The Maximum Pressure approach, which was created to deter Iran, had the unintended side effect of making Tehran more on the brink of developing its nuclear weapons in order to see their regime survive and gain more sway in the region. This trend had worsened the instability in the Middle East and compelled Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt to review their own nuclear options and sparked the possibility of a regional arms race.

In East Asia, the transactional nature of alliances, as well as Trump's statements suggesting US allies such as Japan and South Korea to develop independent nuclear capability, damaged the confidence of US security guarantee. This uncertainty rekindled existing nuclear ambitions in Tokyo and Seoul and further destabilised the region. Trump's stance on arms control issues, such as pulling out of the INF Treaty and postponing the New START agreement renewal, undermined processes with a longstanding record of preventing nuclear escalation that existed. These trends have led to a more unpredictable and fragmented nuclear system, characterised by distrust, competitive modernisation and declining faith in global institutions.

In order to deal with these challenges, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. To stabilise the nuclear non-proliferation system, the United States should favour a set of policy built on credible and sustained alliance reassurances. The first step is to rebuild

confidence in the United States extended deterrent obligations, especially by those allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The administration should take allies into nuclear strategy, meet frequently in high-level talks, and conduct frequent military exercises to maintain long-term assurances.

2. The United States needs to have a pragmatic approach to weapons limitation, not all-or-nothing. Immediate goals include the winning of an unconditional, long-term renewal of the New START Treaty, which is the last verifiable constraint on the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia. Non-binding transparency measures with China in the form of missile test alerts, crisis hotlines, and selective inspection regimes could be helpful to build confidence in the long term without necessarily requiring new cutbacks.

3. Long-term nuclear stability requires the United States to reestablish predictability in the U.S. nuclear posture. Consistent declared policy and a coordinated modernisation strategy that has an associated nonproliferation strategy are critical. Reaffirmation of the NPT's priority, better cooperative arms control and diplomatic consistency are important steps towards reducing systemic nuclear threats. The United States has a chance to renew its historical role as a norm enforcing player in the international system.

To summarise, the unilateral, transactional practice of the Trump administration shattered existing multilateral systems, undermined global nonproliferation norms and made systemic instability worse in many areas. Implementing the above proposals can help regain confidence of the US, bolstering commitment to the alliance and stabilising the global nuclear order.

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