Arms Control Decline

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Global security architecture and the ontological insecurity between developing nations due to rising concerns in the realm of national security and international turmoil has also been a paramount point of discussion in the current news. Be it the deconstruction of the INF Treaty or the nearing expiration of the New START Treaty, it all goes to show that the decline of arms control in the world is inevitable.

Power politics becomes paramount, in a polycentric and competitive nuclear world. In the same lines, control of arms, be it nuclear, biochemical or otherwise is essential. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) is a 1987 arms control agreement between two powerful nations. The United States and the Soviet Union signed this agreement to eliminate all ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometres. There was consideration of withdrawal from United States, which was a conflict of interest and was due to them alleging Russian violations. They specifically mentioned the development and deployment of a prohibited missile system known as the SSC-8by Russia. The withdrawal of the United States resulted in the following Russian response which was a similar line of withdrawal. This breakdown of a vital control measure eroded international arms control and has heightened security concerns. Furthermore, in the context of the Russia- Ukraine war, this liberation from the INF has caused Russia to develop and use land-based cruise and ballistic missiles (e.g., Iskander, Kalibr, Kinzhal) against Ukraine which caused immense damage to infrastructure and humanity. As of May 31, 2025, over 13,300 Ukrainian civilians have been killed in the war, with 11,500 of those due to explosive weapons which includes cruise/ballistic missiles, artillery and MLRS. Therefore, these systems fall in the previously banned INF range. In addition, with no INF restrictions, both Russia and the U.S. have a great motive to deploy more advanced missile systems, risking a new ‘Cold War’ compounded by the Russia-Ukraine war’s hostilities.

Considering the ongoing geopolitical hostility around the world, the decline in arms control is inevitable. Military powerhouses around the globe are taking drastic steps to strengthen their home grounds. Additionally, the forthcoming end of New START Treaty has exacerbated the insecurity in the world as theNew START Treaty is the last surviving United States and Russia arms control pact. The pact withholds control and limitations over various strategic nuclear arsenals. Moreover, this treaty allows mutual inspections between the two countries’ military operations. Signed in 2010, the treaty limits both sides’ strategic nuclear arsenals, including maximum deployment of 1,550 nuclear warheads per side, resisted ICBMs and SLBMs. All things considered, with the expiration of the treaty in 2026 and suspended participation of Russia, this could invite a new nuclear arms race. Alongside the uncertain and inconclusive decisions about the renewal of the treaty, the world must be cautious. In accordance with the ongoing war, with no official agreement of control, the U.S would be threatening its own national security if it were to defend and aid Ukraine.

Parallelly, the sub arguments of military–industrial feedback loop becomes critical. As aforementioned the breakdown of the INF and the impending dissolution of the New START Treaty alters the fiscal calculation when it comes to the pros and cons of military expenditure.

Convulted strategies come into action, wherein making military expansion becomes a rational economic choice under security competition, however, this acts as a dichotomy to increasing arms control in the world.

In the recent years there has been an increased abandonment of agreements. Treaties like the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) have eroded alongside the INF. Thus, in view of this, the reduced limits on military expansion have led the way for uncontrolled increases in military and nuclear arms. Furthermore, nations are now viewing their security as directly proportional to their financial investment in defence. Therefore, resulting in more budgetary allocations towards new, sophisticated and upcoming weapons and this is where the “spiral effect” sets in. A country’s military modernization or strengthening done in the name of investment is often viewed by its opponents as offensive. This motivates the rivals to match or even exceed that investment into its military which results in a vicious cycle of competitive combat, rather than modernity in peace.

As mentioned earlier, a country’s military expenditure always mirrors the role of arms control. This means that arms control historically functioned as a cost-containment mechanism, limiting the need for excessive defence expenditure. In contrast, the decline in arms control shifts reliance toward material deterrence, which is capital-intensive and technologically demanding. A real-life demonstration can be seen post-INF withdrawal where theU.S. and Russia, both redirected funds toward hypersonic missile development, nuclear triad modernization and expanded missile defence systems. These investments not only represent opportunity costs but diverted public funds from welfare, infrastructure, climate adaptation and development goals. The expansion of the global arms industry creates path dependency, where economic growth becomes linked to sustained geopolitical instability.

In today’s world, where globality has become the new trend, this vast dormant sense of heightened international insecurity has had its detrimental effects. Sanctions, export controls, strategic mistrust, all these are transaction costs that pose perils to sensitive sectors such as energy, technology, semiconductors and dual-use goods. When looked at from a larger perspective, this encourages any security aligned economic partnerships and banishes any chances of the world being one. Consequently, a decline in FDI can be foreshadow larger market crashes. This trickling effect of a decline in arms control can and will be deeply destabilizing for global trade, investment and development.

In the spatiotemporal context where militant aggression and arms race predominantly prevail, the control of nuclear arms should be the primary incentive for nations worldwide. Thus, to estimate the resistance required for worldwide peace and security, one must analyse the concrete data. Primarily, the global arms industry’s annual value stands at $475 billion as of 2023, with an estimated growth rate of about 4% per year over the past decade. Applying that 4% annual growth cumulatively, over 10 years it equates to approximately a 48% increase (simple compounding over ten years). Thus, arms control should be controlled now more than ever and the global decline should raise major concerns worldwide. The widening rift between global unification and contrasting national interests reflects the tension between collective security ideals and state-centric approaches, where power politics and sovereignty concerns often undermine international institutions meant to ensure peace and stability.

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