

The Elders urge USA, Russia to halt nuclear arms race as New START expires

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The world faces a destabilising nuclear arms race as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) between the United States of America and the Russian Federation expires on 5 February.

Presidents Trump and Putin share an urgent responsibility to secure a new deal that keeps a cap on US and Russian nuclear arsenals. President Trump should agree to President Putin's proposal for both sides to stay below the central limits of New START for another year after the treaty expires. This would buy time for serious negotiations on a new, sustainable framework for US-Russia nuclear arms control.

As it stands, the expiration of New START will mark the final collapse of the US-Russia nuclear arms control architecture that was built during and after the Cold War. This includes the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) and the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaties. These three treaties helped reduce the risk of nuclear war for many decades.

For the first time in over 50 years, there will be no restraints on the stockpiles of the two biggest nuclear powers. Combined with China's rapidly growing arsenal, this gap risks a dangerous new nuclear arms race taking hold.

If the largest nuclear powers are unwilling to show any restraint on their nuclear arsenals, it will be harder to persuade others not to acquire nuclear weapons. This will increase global proliferation risks at a time when geopolitical tensions are already dangerously high.

The movement of the Doomsday Clock to 85 seconds to midnight last week (the closest it has ever been to catastrophe) underscores that we face an extremely dangerous moment for the future of humanity. Leaders are failing to act with the urgency and responsibility required to reduce nuclear risks.

President Trump has himself acknowledged that there are already enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world "100 times over", and has called for talks on denuclearisation with both Russia and China.

The time for those talks is now.

President Xi should join talks to reduce nuclear risks and increase transparency. However, the Chinese arsenal remains significantly smaller than those of the USA and Russia, and should not be a reason for Washington and Moscow to avoid agreement.

It is in everyone's interests to reduce nuclear risks. Any use of nuclear weapons, whether by accident or intentional, would be a catastrophic failure of leadership. The prize of a nuclear deal, on the other hand, is potentially huge.

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