

THE STRATEGIC NUCLEAR TREATY REGIME AT A CROSSROADS. THE (IM)POSSIBLE SEARCH FOR A NEW POINT OF BALANCE?

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The qualitative and quantitative balance in strategic nuclear capabilities between major global nuclear-armed states had been the subject of a longstanding international bilateral and multilateral treaty regime, which since the onset of the 21st century has undergone a process of continual degradation. With the gradual establishment of a more confrontational multipolar world order, the treaty regime as well as the guarantees it provided for international security have come into further peril. The present paper will examine the defining characteristics of the nuclear treaty regime, the factors leading to a point of balance in preceding decades between the nuclear superpowers of the United States of America and the Russian Federation, and the transformational factors, which have destabilised the balance in contemporary times. Furthermore, the paper will extend the discussion on the future of nuclear arms control to the changing geopolitical landscape and the rise of new major global powers such as the People's Republic of China. Ultimately the paper, attempts to establish the framework of the future evolution of the nuclear arms debate and the possibilities of reaching a new point of stability and deterrence between the mentioned state actors.

Keywords: USA; Russia; China; New START; nuclear weapons; nuclear proliferation;

INTRODUCTION

At the onset of the third decade of the 21st century the continued stability of the international system appears ever more precarious with the developing fault lines between major regional and global powers. As the interests of major political actors shift towards a more confrontational stance, a return to the division and uncertainties reminiscent of previous eras has transitioned from possibly into reality. In the shaping new global environment, past notions and established principles are becoming quickly irrelevant and castoff, especially when pertaining to the issues of nuclear security and the strategic nuclear balance between major global powers.

With the degradation in relations between the two historical nuclear "superpowers" of the United States of America (USA) and the Russian Federation (Russia), which now again find themselves on the opposing sides of a proverbial global division, the final surviving elements of the diverse decades old treaty framework governing the subject of nuclear security have been progressively discarded, placing the international system in a state of heightened uncertainty and instability, reminiscent of the darkest days of the Cold War-era nuclear arms race. On the backdrop of the rising tensions between the USA and Russia, the People's Republic of China (China) has transformed its meteoric economic rise into a military one, becoming the third largest nuclear state, and developing capabilities that would put it on par with both the USA and Russia.

In this new reality, the previously established balance becomes questionable, many of its elements being already part of the past. With new nuclear arms race already gaining pace between the three powers, the question as to whether a new point of balance can be reached, and whether the former systems of stability and security can be reconfigured or reconstructed to suit modern realities becomes an existential enquiry on the future of human civilisation.

Within the present paper, the essence of what is termed the historical "nuclear treaty regime" is examined, its rise and fall as a structure of the international system, as well as the specific factors manifesting over the preceding decades, which have placed the major nuclear powers of the contemporary era ever further from the point of balance, which had been established. The ultimate objective being to establish whether the currently unfolding processes of nuclear competition can be

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contained into a new framework, the factors acting both in its favour and against its materialisation and the possibility for such a proverbial regulatory regime to exist within the confines of a multipolar world made up of powers with radically different approaches, capabilities and postures are considered.

THE POINT OF BALANCE AND THE NUCLEAR TREATY REGIME. A BRIEF SUMMARISATION

In order to understand the contemporary and future potential state of affairs surrounding the “*nuclear treaty regime*”, and how major nuclear powers have moved away from a previous “*point of balance*” within it, it is first necessary to understand what is meant by these terms both in general scientific discussions and within the confines of the specific paper.

A “*regime*”, by definition, is a “*particular way of operating or organising a system*”. The system in question pertains to the wide system of international treaties, which has come to materialise in the past seven decades towards ascribing certain limitations to the existence, proliferation, qualitative and quantitative characteristics of fission and fusion weapons and their deployment across nation-states, and to regulate their impact across the wider security spectrum in intranational affairs and the international system, with the principal goal of maintaining deterrence through nuclear means. The specific interactions and objectives of the interrelationships between such treaties are defined together, in a system of overall relations and outcomes, as the “*nuclear treaty regime*”. The overall state of this system, when in consideration of the major nuclear powers and their respective security perceptions, had reached a point of parity in capabilities and thus a stable condition, is defined as the “*point of balance*”, which under duress and according to changes in one or more elements of the larger system can correspondingly shift.

The nuclear treaty regime and its corresponding elements and characteristics necessitate further clarification and explanation in projecting its evolution and impact across time, leading up to the present moment. As previously stated, the regime is centred on the existence of an array of treaties, which in their individual conceptions bear the hallmarks of the post-Second World War international system, namely the realisation of the power of the atom as a weapons system of new unparalleled authority in the arsenal of the nation-state, and the evolution of the international system around a “*rules-based*” world order in its search for peace, balance and stability, working international mechanisms of agreement, regulation, enforcement and verification, in particular between the powers of the bipolar Cold War world order.

The nuclear treaty regime can be subdivided into two aspects of its existence. There are the international treaties, which encompass the larger international system, which primarily focused on preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons technology beyond the already existing “*recognised*” “club of nuclear weapons states”, limiting the usage of atomic power to peaceful purposes, and providing for instruments of verification and enforcement of the agreed upon international rules. The principal treaty in this regard is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968. An assortment of other treaties was established to also prohibit the placement of nuclear weapons in specific environs, understood to be unclaimable by any specific nation state, such as outer space, Antarctica and the ocean floor, with the Outer Space Treaty of 1967, prohibiting the placement of nuclear weapons in outer space; the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, stipulating the same for the frozen continent; and the Seabed Arms Control Treaty of 1971, preventing placement of nuclear weapons on the seafloor. Progressively, regional treaties have also been established to prohibit the placement of nuclear weapons by outside powers in specific regions of the globe, thus establishing so-called “*nuclear-free zones*”, with some examples being the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean of 1968; the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty of 1985; the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty of 1995; and the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty of 1996. A further regulative framework was continuously established to reduce and ultimately prohibit the active nuclear testing by nuclear-armed states, and thus limit environmental consequences and the ability of non-nuclear states to proceed with active programs, these treaties sequentially being the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1967; the Threshold Test Ban Treaty of 1974; and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty of 1996 (which unfortunately has not come into force due to the lack of ratification by some major powers, but whose valid signatories have retained from undermining its stipulations). On the other side of the spectrum exist the bilateral treaties between the two historical nuclear super-powers of the United States of America and the Soviet Union/Russian Federation, which have evolved into their own sub-framework of treaties as part of the broader system of the nuclear treaty regime, striving towards quantitative reductions, but also a diverse array of qualitative limitations in offensive and defensive capabilities of both states in specific categories of nuclear and nuclear-related armaments. These treaties in turn formed the centrepiece of the search for a point of balance in the construction of the nuclear treaty regime,

and include: the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty or ABM Treaty of 1972 (Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, 1972), which recognised an arms race in ABM systems as being potentially catastrophic to “conventional” nuclear deterrence, and thus limited the number of sites and of protected objects of the larger nuclear infrastructure to only two; the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks or SALT I (1972) and SALT II (1979), which sought to begin a facilitated process of bilateral talks on reduction of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), general reduction of the number of warheads, and to overall construct a platform for facilitating further contact negotiations, and despite not achieving specific treaty results, fulfilled their penultimate role as a facilitator of an expanded treaty framework; the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty or INF Treaty of 1987, which effectively eliminated the entire class of ground-launched intermediate-range ballistic (IRBM) and cruise (GLCM) missiles from the inventories of both states; and finally the sequential series of Strategic Arms Reduction treaties or START (1991) (US Department of State, 1991), which began the deconstruction of the Cold War-era nuclear arsenals towards more economical and manageable levels, whilst ensuring a stable parity in strategic offensive capabilities, aimed at achieving a minimum level of deterrence.

Altogether the nuclear treaty regime, in both aspects of its existence, defines heavy nuances and disproportionalities, which exist to this day and age. The set of treaties in the first category prevented the proliferation of nuclear technology beyond the major victorious powers of the Second World War. The set of treaties in the second category ensured that nuclear deterrence and parity can be achieved and maintained, but also excluded other nuclear powers, or for that matter even non-nuclear powers, from the discussion table on key topics.

THE POST-COLD WAR ERA AND THE DOWNFALL OF THE NUCLEAR TREATY REGIME

The nuclear treaty regime was in its essence a construct of the Cold War world order. Its elements, regulations, nuances and subjective fairness were built upon and centred around the bipolar international system and the principal objective of ensuring peace through nuclear deterrence between the two nuclear superpowers of the USA and USSR and their respective smaller nuclear capable allies, whilst also ensuring that nuclear proliferation did not occur in an uncontrolled and mutually disagreeable fashion.

Thus, when the accepted order of the day, which to a large degree had brought about concrete measures of stability in the qualitative aspects of nuclear arms, and was actively engaged in bringing about significant quantitative reductions, collapsed in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union, seismic changes were an expected outcome for the future of the established nuclear treaty regime, as well as the overall state of nuclear stability across the globe. On the one hand, the future state of affairs between the United States of America and the Russian Federation, which was internationally recognised as the inheriting international entity of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, was preserved and evolved further towards maintaining a point of strategic balance in capabilities with the lineage of treaties descending from the SALT negotiations, namely the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty I (START I) in 1991, START II in 1993 (never came into force, due to reasons elaborated upon in the following paragraphs), Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty in 2002 (SORT) and NEW START in 2010 (known as START III or SNV III in Russia). Collectively these treaties formed the cornerstone in the efforts of reducing the Cold War-era arsenals towards points of near parity, and would form the last tangible surviving element of the nuclear treaty regime and the nexus of discussion between the USA and Russia into the 2020s. On the other hand, the novel international scene of the post-Cold War era presented new challenges in the control of nuclear proliferation, with Pakistan acquiring nuclear weapons in the late 1990s, the People's Republic of China continuing its nuclear weapons and delivery mechanism programs, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Islamic Republic of Iran striving towards acquiring such weapons, with the former achieving practical results by 2006. These developments were in stark opposition to the controlled order of the bipolar system of the Cold War, and presented a radically new aspect in security considerations internationally, and specifically for the dominant global power in this era, the United States of America.

As these developments coalesce into positions of stark contrast with each other, between past ambitions of nuclear parity and new policy choices towards maintaining strategic superiority in a more complex and precarious international system, the general nuclear treaty regime between the USA and Russia falters, and the system of treaties begins to unwind.

CHANGES IN POLICY. FACTORS OF DISPARITY BETWEEN THE USA AND RUSSIA

Any system, in the examined case that of the nuclear treaty regime, is, in its essence, as strong as its constituent elements, which through their interaction and dependencies ensure its effective operation. When certain elements of the system are put under duress and the overall system loses its ability to afford reconstitution in order to ensure its continued operation, such a system begins the process of degradation, which unless stopped, would inevitably lead to its collapse (Marinov, 2021, pp. 301-311).

As mentioned beforehand, the nuclear treaty regime, as systemised during the Cold War, had the peculiarities and limitations in scope related to the interactions, chiefly between the USA and the USSR, as well as the specific set of threats, in terms of nuclear capabilities, which each posed to one another. In the post-Cold War era, the materialisation of new threats expressed in a growing potential number of nuclear states as well as the proliferation of ballistic missile technology led to a reconstitution in priorities for US offensive and defensive nuclear capabilities, going beyond simple deterrence with its chief nuclear rival.

With the START I Treaty of 1991 setting the path for a general reduction of nuclear arsenals between the USA and Russia, as well as the inability of Russia in both economic potential and political willingness in the 1990s to pursue a renewed stage of nuclear armaments modernisation and competition, the USA reconfigured its nuclear policy. The focus was, thus, shifted away from continuing cost-prohibitive investments in offensive strategic nuclear arms, a policy course, which has remained, in large part, true even today, with the mainstay of US offensive capabilities in 2022 remaining with the legacy Minuteman III (LGM-30G) land-based ICBM and the Trident II (UGM-133A) sea-based SLBM (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022, pp. 48-58). Whilst both missile systems have undergone successive periods of modernisation, no new strategic offensive system has been introduced, with potential replacements not apparent for the near future. The policy choice was made in consideration of the parity established with Russia at the time, as well as the lack of any potential new opponent capable of fielding a nuclear arsenal of sufficient qualitative and quantitative capacity to compete with US capabilities. Instead, the focus of US policy was, by the early 2000s, placed with the consideration in mind of smaller nuclear powers, rogue state actors, or otherwise states with a profusely anti-US position in global affairs threatening US

interests even on the regional level. Thus, by 2002, the USA moved to abandon the ABM Treaty with Russia, and to develop its defensive capabilities, with the stated goal of deterring aggression from rogue state actors. Since then, the USA has developed an array of both land-based (Ground-Based Midcourse Defense and later land-based AEGIS) and sea-based (AEGIS) ABM capabilities, which have consistently evolved over the subsequent two decades to produce a potent missile defence umbrella, especially against states with limited and technologically underdeveloped arsenals. The Russian side responded to the withdrawal of the USA from the BMD Treaty with its own withdrawal from the START II Treaty, immediately following. Russia's own considerations and interests can be interpreted with the specifics of the START II Treaty banning multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), and the desire of Russia to maintain its potent arsenal of the UR-100N and the super-heavy R-36M ICBMs, which in turn posed a potent danger even to a well-developed BMD network.

Nevertheless, based upon these developments of the early 2000s, the partially fallacious assumption can be extrapolated that the point of balance had been overall maintained. Strategic priorities had shifted between the two major nuclear superpowers, with one focusing on its defensive capabilities, whilst the other maintaining potent offensive capabilities, cancelling out each other and ensuring a continued state of stable nuclear deterrence. In turn, both sides continued talks on further disarmament, culminating in the SORT Treaty in 2002 and the New START Treaty in 2010, reducing nuclear arsenals and strategic delivery systems to an all-time low by 2022, and the de jure expiration of the latter. However, such initial perceptions depart from the basic structure of the nuclear treaty regime of the Cold War, and the point of stability and balance that it established, recognising that any significant quantitative or qualitative deviation of both sides would be tantamount to undermining the entire system of stability in the longer period of time of a given system's evolution and severity of deployment. The systemic choice had previously been to either limit specific weapons systems for both sides in equal measure, as it had been the case of the ABM Treaty, or outright outlaw weapons categories altogether, such being the cases of land-based intermediate-range missiles (IRBMs) with the INF Treaty or the fractional orbital bombardment system (FOBS) with the Outer-Space Treaty and SALT II. In the two decades since the United States has vastly expanded its ABM capabilities to include an increasing number of launch platforms and increasingly more capable missile interceptors with the SM-2, SM-3 Block IIA

and perspective SM-3 Block IIB, in a missile defence array, which has become responsive and adaptable, owing to the combination of extensive land and space-based early warning and tracking infrastructure, and an expansive and versatile defensive umbrella placed on the large fleet of Ticonderoga-class cruisers and Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, as well set land-based sites (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022, p. 110). In turn, Russia has aggressively pursued the modernisation of its nuclear triad, whilst also investing heavily in novel perspective offensive nuclear weapons systems, the stated goal being a clear opposition and a perceived danger from US ABM capabilities towards the state of deterrence between the two nuclear superpowers. Russia has since introduced the RT-2PM2 Topol-M, RS-24 Yars and RS-26 Rubezh road-mobile ICBMs, the RS-28 Sarmat silo-based ICBM, and the R-29RMU Sineva, R-29RMU2 Layner and RSM-56 Bulava SLBMs (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022, p. 194). In addition, Russia has developed the new carrier platforms with the Borei-class SSBN and a modernised version of the Tu-160 supersonic strategic bomber. A further focus has been placed on developing technological solutions, specifically aimed at overcoming BMD umbrellas with the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV), mounted on the UR-100, RS-26, and RS-28 missiles, the Kh-47M2 Kinzhal aero-ballistic missile, the supposed capability of the RS-28 to produce act in a FOBS capacity, the development of the Poseidon strategic nuclear underwater nuclear-powered system and the 9M730 Burevestnik intercontinental nuclear-armed nuclear-powered cruise missile (ICCM) (Marinov, *Redefining the Strategic Nuclear Balance. Novel Strategic Offensive Weapons Systems*, 2022). Thus, by the late 2010s a clear arms race had developed, which whilst still in the confines of the treaty stipulations of New Start in terms of pure quantitative arsenals and limited launch platforms, was rapidly accelerating in scope and pace with the introduction of new and novel weapons systems with the objective of gaining a strategic edge on opposing side.

The further degradation of established treaty principles came with reported further expansion of Russia's offensive arsenal with the development of intermediate-range missile systems, in violation of the INF Treaty. In the war of mutual accusations that followed (TACC, 2019), the USA ultimately withdrew from the Treaty in 2019 (Lopez, 2019), with both sides stating their intention to return to the development of such missile systems, with the Russian 9M729 and 3M-54 (Kalibr) based on the Iskander complex, and with a US ground-launched cruise

missile also in development. In the context of the rapidly deteriorating relations, and the downward spiral of the international environment since, where trust was quickly evaporating, the USA withdrew from the Treaty on Open Skies in 2020, followed by Russia in 2021 (МИД России, 2021), thus removing a key element in the framework for established mechanisms of verification, treaty compliance, and confidence and trust building (RUSI, 2020). Finally, the last significant element in the nuclear treaty regime by 2021 remained the New START Treaty. Both sides showed interest to renew commitments in the nuclear security talks, and had agreed by early 2021 to trigger the extension clause of the treaty for an additional five-year period, thus making the treaty extend to 2026 (US Department of State, 2022), with expected negotiations on a subsequent treaty to further reduce and define nuclear inventories having continued, despite the collapse of overall diplomatic relations (Reuters, 2022; Interfax, 2022). On the one hand, the USA expressed its desire for the treaty to include China (Dubois, 2021). A prospect that China itself viewed unfavourably, arguing that the treaty is unequal in respect to its own capabilities and would place discriminatory limits compared to US and Russian arsenals (Quinn, 2019). On the other hand, both the USA and Russia expressed interest and commitments in further security talks, even despite the grave situation surrounding the conflict in Ukraine and the unprecedented rift in overall relations between the two states.

The dissonance between the United States of America and Russia should, however, not be viewed in a proverbial vacuum and in the context of the relations only between these two states within the larger international system. The imbalances and nuances of the Cold War-era mindset greatly contributed to the outcome of the treaty regime being not only beneficial in terms of its allowance towards nuclear capabilities for the two major global nuclear powers but also discriminative in not gravitating other states towards the same regulations and limitations, which had been recognised as risking deterrence and nuclear stability. As it was mentioned previously, the changing nature of the international environment in the post-Cold War era, the active threats and aggressive competitors contributed a significant transformational factor in the precipitated changes leading up to the general collapse of the treaty regime. The existence of such national actors underwrites a decisive role in the discussions leading up to a potential reformation of the treaty system, with the chief ones among them. Perhaps the actor of highest gravity in precipitating change currently and in the future is the People's Republic of China and its rise to not only economic but also to military power.

THE ROLE OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The power potential of the People's Republic of China has gradually transitioned from a purely economic and financial power house to an ever more affluent political actor with global standing and interests and an expanding array of military capabilities. The rise of China has placed it in direct opposition with both other regional powers of Eastern and Southern Asia, as well as the superpower of the United States of America, which has come to increasingly view China in its policy documents as its preeminent adversary in the decades to come. China has increasingly grown closer to Russia and has been one of its most active supporters in the international system of relations. Thus, by 2022, and in an increasingly multipolar world marked by increasing tension and open conflict, China stands as a crucial new player in the potential reformation of the structures of balance and stability in the world of tomorrow, including those pertaining to nuclear security.

The expansion of China's conventional military has been, more recently, coupled with the expansion of its nuclear forces. Since 2013, China has embarked on a path to greatly increase the role and potential of its developed nuclear triad, reforming its armed force's structure, better defining its nuclear posture and deterrence policy, and placing an ever-expanding accent on the introduction of new and more capable elements to its nuclear strike power potential (Bogdanov & Marinov, 2022, pp. 50-55). In policy terms, China has presented several key cornerstones, those being namely: that the Chinese nuclear posture only envisions the employment of nuclear weapons in a second-strike capability and only against an adversary who has utilised nuclear weapons against China; China does not seek to compete with the arsenals of the USA and Russia, but also recognises that treaties between the two states and any potential treaties with China would place the Chinese state in an unfair position; the principal rival and risk for Chinese interests and security remains the United States of America; and finally, that whilst not competing with the US arsenal in quantitative terms, China retains the right and ambition to pursue a nuclear second-strike capability in qualitative terms, capable of fulfilling the stated strategy of conducting effective "*counter-value*" or in Chinese terms "*counter-cities*" strikes in a second-strike capacity (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019; Cordesman, 2019).

As of 2022, the PRC has risen to be the third largest global nuclear power, with an estimated arsenal of up to 350 warheads, spread across a working and technologically sophisticated nuclear triad, thus being the only such state other than the United States of America and Russia. China has strived to actively modernise

its delivery mechanisms and increase them to a number sufficient to encompass the available arsenals of warheads (which in reported Chinese doctrine are traditionally kept separate from most of the launch platforms). In 2022, according to Western estimates, China possesses 116 ICBMs, the most numerous being the DF-31 and DF-41 classes; 110 IRBMs of the DF-26 class; 80 nuclear-capable MRBMs of the DF-21 classes; and up to 72 SLBMs spread across 6 Type-094 SSBNs; in addition to a strategic air arm of H-6 bombers of both legacy and modernised designs (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022, pp. 255-260). In qualitative terms, the Chinese arsenal, not being bound by the INF Treaty, has exponentially developed in the direction of intermediate-range and medium-range missiles. The principal objectives of these classes of weapons in Chinese inventory have been projected to encompass the role of providing the PRC with a tool for regional dominance, and specifically against US interests and capabilities spread across the Western Pacific. Apart from the already stated Russian Avangard HGV, China has been the other principal state actor to develop a working HGV delivery mechanism with the DF-ZF, mounted on a DF-17 MRBM, with a supposed conventional warhead, geared towards the same role of projecting regional power against US land-based and naval assets and their BMD umbrella.

Regardless of the expansion of its nuclear arsenal and its capabilities, China continues to claim that it is a secondary nuclear power compared with the United States of America and Russia, and has no aspirations to expand its nuclear arsenal to the levels of the aforementioned and thus does not seek direct competition. Furthermore, China has also claimed its own radically different approach towards its nuclear posture compared to the USA and Russia, promoting the existence of nuclear weapons-free zones, a posture geared towards a second-strike capability only, and direct assurances not to ever utilise nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state. Chinese attitudes towards any potential treaty negotiations place the above points as key, and so far, incompatible with the policies and doctrines of the USA and Russia. Moreover, it is the lack of any specific treaty obligations, which have allowed China to develop its capabilities, especially in its medium and intermediate-range missile systems, independently of the US-Russia strategic nuclear relationship and its limitations. The unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable question currently remaining is whether China would pursue nuclear capabilities within the limits of its own stated strategy or it would go beyond to actively compete with the USA and Russia as a true nuclear superpower.

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF A NEW TREATY REGIME?

With major elements of the nuclear treaty framework between the United States of America and Russia having already collapsed, ushering an era of renewed nuclear rearmament, as well as the rise of China as a major nuclear power of significance in the calculations of both the USA and Russia, the question as to the possibility of finding a renewed point of balance arises. The potential answer lies in several factors of the contemporary world order and would be dependent on their coalescence and successful management into a new nuclear treaty regime.

The first factor of consideration is that of the remaining New START Treaty and the need for its preservation and eventual replacement as a facilitator of further dialogue between the United States of America and Russia. The corresponding effects of its discontinuation would be a further step towards a new and uncontrolled nuclear arms race, which unlike the rearmament processes at present would also allow for the gradual increase in both nuclear carrier platforms and even of the general increase in the number of nuclear warheads (Countryman, 2019, pp. 1-5). For the United States of America, a future nuclear treaty framework is desirable in a format that includes China, as it would potentially regulate the uncontrolled expansion of both conventional and nuclear Chinese strike capabilities, whilst also potentially reducing Russia's nuclear potential as an ally of China. For the Russian Federation, there is dissimilar desire to extend the START format, considering the profound lack of regulations for the new systems Russia has begun to develop and field as well as the need to keep restriction on the potential enlargement of the US offensive strategic nuclear arsenal. Additionally, and in the interests of Russia, the inclusion of China in any trilateral treaty format is currently unfavourable, as it alleviates major potential restrictions or regulations on China in its own increasingly more open and aggressive competition with the United States of America.

The second factor is that of the disparity in strategic arms inventories currently accelerating with the rearmament process. Unlike with the Cold War-era nuclear arms race, where the USA and the USSR raced each other in similar categories of weapons systems, and afterwards allowed for a mutually beneficial agreement on their limitation, the current arms race is in categories of dissimilar properties, enshrined in different approaches towards nuclear security. Ergo, the ease of transition towards disarmament witnessed with the SOLT, START, INF and ABM Treaties of the past is greatly aggravated in the contemporary and future periods, when sides have to agree upon the limiting or outright disposal of weapons

systems, which the other side does not possess, thus foregoing a potential strategic edge. The disparity in the nuclear arsenals is further defined as gravitating strictly towards the development of "*first-strike*" systems, with both the United States of America viewing Russian and Chinese HGV development and the future Poseidon underwater system as such weapons, and correspondingly, Russia and China accusing ABM developments in the USA as a nullifier of their own "*second-strike*" capacity and thus a facilitator for a US "*first-strike*".

The third factor is expressed in the role of China and its own capabilities and ambitions as both a pre-eminent nuclear power and major international actor on the world stage. With both China and the United States of America, recognising each other as competitors and potential threats to their respective national security objectives, the forthcoming strategic nuclear security environment would place China and its evolving nuclear arsenal as an adversary of the United States of America, alongside Russia. Such a scenario would bear certain similarity to the status of the US nuclear allies in Europe when relating to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but with the additional and incomparable strategic weight of China possessing a technologically competitive nuclear arsenal to that of the USA. Thus, the inclusion of China and its own aspirations as a factor in shaping global security would be vital in potential treaty negotiations, as it has so far been the intention of the USA. However, China has repeatedly shown unwillingness to participate in such a format, viewing it as unfair in respect to Chinese capabilities and stated policy, demanding reductions in the arsenals of both Russia and the USA before any meaningful negotiations, as well as condemning the specific role of the ABM systems in the US arsenal (Quinn, 2019; Reuters, 2020). Nonetheless, a new nuclear treaty framework, which includes China, along with the United States of America and Russia, would be the highest form of recognition internationally for the new role of China in the global order of the future, as well as a tool to assert influence in the shaping of its chief adversary's nuclear capabilities.

Based on the above, the prospects for a new treaty regime seemingly rely on mutually exclusive factors, which would require the respective states of the USA, Russia and China to produce decisions counterproductive towards their own power potential. The history of the nuclear treaty regime has demonstrated that such abnormal occurrences are possible within the international system, when the instability and risks included in a nuclear arms race become uncontrollable factors for the security perceptions of all states involved.

For the purposes of this paper, and the question posed, several key components can be ascertained in respect to the previously listed factors, which would make up a potential future nuclear treaty regime possible. These components can be described as regulatory and restricting measures in quantitative terms, when discussing the specific numerical values of both individual available warheads and individual offensive or defensive systems, and qualitative terms, when discussing their specific capabilities and general disparities in such systems being developed on the opposing sides vis-à-vis one another. The quantitative element will in large part be dependent on the qualitative one, and the formulation of a new point of balance between the systems possessed by each side. Nevertheless, the specific numerical values of these components are impossible to achieve in the confines of a system ordered in a similar fashion to the one of the Cold War-era, the main contributory factor being that the nuclear treaty framework of the Cold War was the product of the bipolar international system of the period. In the multipolar order of the contemporary era, the construction of a new treaty framework, in order to be effective and truly directed towards balance, would have to, by necessity of the actors involved and their ambitions, contain a drastic alteration to the mindset and general assumptions of nuclear security and stability beyond the confines of the two-superpower model. A supplementary factor, as previously described, would be the significant qualitative disparity in the armaments and strategies currently being pursued by the respective nuclear powers of the USA, Russia and China.

With these elements and factors taken into account on the possibility or impossibility to forge ahead a new systemic solution to the problem of achieving a viable point of balance between the nuclear powers, the ultimate solution may lie in the historical precedence and the general working order of the international system. In hindsight, the Cold War-era solutions, the construction and adoption of the nuclear treaty regime itself were the product of a preceding decade old process, which placed all sides in an uncertain and procedurally escalating security environment around the capabilities and potential employment of nuclear weapons by the adversary. The only solution to the uncertainties of the Cold War era, facilitated by great strides in technology and strike potential in manner not too dissimilar to the current era, was the acceptance of a regulated framework with mutual obligations and regulatory measures. What remains to be seen is whether such historical lessons have been forgotten, and whether the current and future points of discontent between the major powers will prove to be insurmountable obstacles towards peace and stability.

CONCLUSIONS

The nuclear treaty framework established since the late-Cold War period can be stated to have been thoroughly dismantled by 2022, the only surviving element being the New START Treaty, a vital one, as the potential for an uncontrolled increase in the nuclear arsenals of the United States of America and Russia has so far been contained. Nonetheless, the downfall of the ABM and INF treaties, amongst others, has ushered in a noticeable increase in the nuclear capabilities of both nuclear superpowers, with both pursuing independent paths towards maintaining their respective perceptions for nuclear security. Against the backdrop of the relationship between the USA and Russia, China has risen to the forefront of the debate, not only by being the third largest nuclear power, but also by developing a technologically advanced and competitive nuclear arsenal. With the deteriorating international environment, facing even bleaker prospects for cooperation in the future, a return to normalcy can be prided by the reconstruction or reinvention of the nuclear treaty regime. Significant hurdles are faced in such a grandiose task, those namely being the qualitative differences in the currently developing arsenals of the USA and Russia, and the quantitative differences in respect to China and the stated ambition to engage it in the future rebalancing act of power distribution in the nuclear security sphere. With the volatility that a compromised state of nuclear security can bring to the international system, still present in recent memory, prospects remain for finding a solution, which would require major concessions and higher degrees of understanding and acceptance than ever before.

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