Backgrounder No. 22
January 14, 2026

History of Strategic Arms Limitation Agreements

Alisiya Ivanova

Summary

The history of strategic arms control agreements started during the Cold War, when the arms race between the two military-political blocs led by the USSR and the USA reached its peak.

Contents

1 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
2 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty
3 SALT-I and SALT-II
4 INF Treaty
5 START-I and START-II
6 SORT and START-III (New START)

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 marked a turning point in the history of the Cold War. It showed how close the parties can come to a nuclear conflict and thus became a catalyst for the creation of mechanisms aimed at reducing nuclear tensions.

The first international treaty in this area was the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water (Partial Test Ban Treaty) which was signed in 1963. It called for an end to atmospheric, space, and underwater testing of nuclear bombs in order to prevent radioactive contamination of the environment and reduce the risk of nuclear war. The treaty was signed by the USA, USSR and the UK. There are currently 131 State parties to the Treaty.

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

The next important round in the development of agreements in the field of nuclear arms control was the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), signed in 1968. Since that time, more than 190 states have acceded to the NPT, including Belarus. It

became the first treaty limiting the proliferation of nuclear weapons and establishing the norms of nuclear cooperation between states.

The idea of the NPT arose as early as 1957 at the UN General Assembly Conference on Nuclear Energy. However, the first serious negotiations began only in 1960, when US President Dwight Eisenhower publicly put forward the initiative to create a treaty. The USSR at first opposed the initiative, but later agreed to discuss it. Negotiations on the NPT took several years.

NPT signatories undertake an obligation to not transfer nuclear weapons to other states, and to not develop nuclear weapons if they have not yet been developed. At the same time, the NPT allows member states to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Almost all states of the world are parties to the treaty, with the exception of Israel, India, Pakistan, South Sudan and the DPRK.

Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty

In 1972, the US and the USSR signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty). The idea of such a treaty arose as early as the late 1960s in connection with the high costs of the arms race and the risk of an all-out nuclear war. At that time, the United States proposed to impose severe restrictions on strategic missile defense systems. The USSR did not accept this proposal, but in its counterproposal put forward an initiative that the ABM negotiations should include a discussion of strategic offensive weapons. This counter-proposal was accepted by the USA.

The ABM Treaty set limits on the number and location of missile defense systems that could be used to defend against a nuclear threat. It also banned the distribution and testing of new types of missile defense systems. The treaty also contained a clause to terminate if “extraordinary events” have jeopardized the “supreme interests” of the country. The agreement was in effect for more than 30 years until the United States withdrew from it in 2002, justifying this by the need to create a modern missile defense system to protect against possible threats from terrorists and rogue states. At that time, the United States began the “war on terror”, which was triggered by the 9 September 2001 terrorist attacks. As a result, the ABM Treaty ceased to operate in 2002.

SALT-I and SALT-II

In 1972, the USSR and the US signed an Interim Agreement on Certain Measures in the Field of Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (SALT-I), which was concluded for five years. In 1979, SALT-I was replaced by SALT-II — the Treaty on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. SALT-II limited the number of launchers for intercontinental

ballistic missiles (ICBMs), launchers for submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), heavy bombers, and air-to-ground ballistic missiles (ASBMs) to a total of 2,400 for each side. The treaty never entered into force, as in 1979 the US administration withdrew it from the Senate, thus suspending the ratification process. For some time, the US and the USSR continued to comply with the provisions of the treaty, but not without violations.

INF Treaty

In 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) was signed, which provided for the destruction of such missiles on the territory of the USSR and the US. By May-June 1991, the treaty had been fully complied with. A total of 2,692 short and medium-range missiles were destroyed: 1,846 by the USSR and 846 by the United States.

After 2007, amid the general deterioration in the relations between Russia and the United States, the two countries periodically accused each other of violating the INF Treaty, as well as raised the issue of withdrawing from it unilaterally. On 1 February 2019, US President Donald Trump announced the start of the withdrawal procedure. On 2 February 2019, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia, in response to US actions, was also suspending participation in the INF Treaty. On 2 August, 2019, the United States officially withdrew from the treaty, and the Russian Foreign Ministry officially announced its termination.

However, a number of signatory countries of the INF Treaty did not withdraw from it. In that manner, in September 2019, Alexander Lukashenko announced the intention of Belarus to continue to adhere to the provisions of the INF Treaty.

START-I and START-II

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-I) was signed on 31 July 1991 and entered into force after the dissolution of the USSR — on 5 December 1994. In May 1992, by signing the Lisbon Protocol, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine joined START-I.

The treaty provided for the quantitative reduction of strategic offensive weapons such as ICBMs and ICBM launchers, SLBMs, heavy bombers, ICBM warheads, SLBM warheads and heavy bomber weapons. The agreement describes in detail the algorithms for counting weapons and warheads to be reduced, as well as restrictions on the locations and testing of these types of weapons. START-I is considered one of the most successful treaties in its field, since by the time it was fully implemented, 80% of the world's stock of strategic nuclear weapons had been destroyed.

START-I expired on 5 December 2009, and in January 1993 the US and Russia signed a new Treaty on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START-II). The treaty provided for a reduction in the number of warheads on strategic launchers to 3000-3500 units, and also required the elimination of all ground-based ballistic missiles equipped with more than one warhead, as well as the elimination of warheads that are listed behind deployed heavy ICBMs. Russia ratified START-II in May 2000, but the US did not complete similar procedures. On 14 June 2002, a day after Washington withdrew from the ABM Treaty, Moscow announced that it no longer considered itself bound by START-II obligations. Thus, START-II never entered into force.

SORT and START-III (New START)

In 2002, Russia and the United States signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT Treaty), the purpose of which was to limit the number of nuclear warheads on combat duty for each side. The treaty did not provide for any special procedures for its implementation and observance, but only legally fixed the intentions of the parties to reduce and limit strategic nuclear warheads. The SORT Treaty became invalid due to the entry into force of the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START-III or New START) on 5 February 2011.

START-III provided for the reduction of deployed nuclear warheads to 1550 units, intercontinental ballistic missiles, ballistic missiles of submarines and heavy bombers — up to 700 units for each side. The Treaty, like its predecessors START-I and START-II, provided for the possibility of mutual inspections of the sides' military nuclear facilities. START-III was designed for 10 years, and in 2021 was extended through 2026.

On 21 February 2023, Vladimir Putin, in his Address to the Federal Assembly, announced the suspension of Russia's participation in START-III, justifying this by the intention of the United States and NATO “to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia”, as well as the development of new types of nuclear weapons by the United States. Nevertheless, Moscow announced its intention to comply with the treaty's limitations on the number of nuclear charge carriers until the end of its life cycle. The agreement expires on February 5, 2026.

Thus, in 2023, the last bilateral arms control treaty between the major nuclear powers was suspended. The only existing multilateral treaty is the global Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

Alisiya Ivanova
Analyst, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations