

President Trump's Position on Nuclear Non-Proliferation: The Inherent Contradiction and Its Implications

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Since the beginning of his second term, President Trump has spoken about nuclear weapons several times, emphasizing their urgency and declaring his intention to address them after resolving the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East. He also stressed the need to discuss arms control with Russia and China, as well as to cut defense budgets in half—particularly in the nuclear domain. This stands in contrast to his first term, which was characterized by a retreat from steps aimed at advancing disarmament and arms control, and prioritization of modernizing the nuclear arsenal, alongside a strategic rivalry with China.

However, in practice, instead of creating conditions conducive to advancing his stated goal, Trump has acted in ways that could actually promote nuclear proliferation. The growing recognition that the United States under Trump's administration cannot serve as a reliable ally has, in fact, provided renewed momentum to French President Emmanuel Macron's proposed "strategic autonomy," to reduce Europe's security dependence on the United States. It is likely that a decision by states that have so far relied on the American nuclear umbrella, to develop independent nuclear capabilities, would legitimize similar moves by other nations. As a result, Trump's approach toward allies may ultimately push his disarmament objective further out of reach, rather than advancing it, while also threatening the future of the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty).

Since the beginning of his second term, President Trump has repeatedly spoken about the future of nuclear weapons, emphasizing his intention to address the issue after resolving the crises between Russia and Ukraine and in the Middle East. On March 25, 2024 he expressed his desire for global nuclear disarmament, stating: "It would be a great thing if we could all rid ourselves of nuclear weapons because the power of nuclear weapons is insane, just insane." Trump underscored the urgency of addressing nuclear proliferation and reiterated his call for Russia and China to renew arms control talks and drastically reduce defense budgets.

The Kremlin spokesperson, who responded positively to Trump's proposal, emphasized that the negotiations should also include the United Kingdom and France, particularly in light of President Macron's remarks about the possibility of expanding France's nuclear umbrella to additional European countries. However, Russia's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) clarified that under the current geopolitical circumstances, Trump's proposal for nuclear disarmament is "out of the question." In response to Trump's proposals, China stated that the United States should lead by example by cutting its own defense budget. According to China, since the U.S. and Russia possess 90% of the world's nuclear weapons,

they bear the responsibility for taking the lead in nuclear disarmament. Specifically, China refuses to engage in Trump's proposed trilateral arms control negotiations or discussions on strategic stability, as long as it remains at a quantitative disadvantage in nuclear warheads and launch systems.

The record of the first Trump administration on arms control (AC) and nuclear disarmament (ND) does not indicate success in achieving these goals. On the contrary, the United States withdrew in 2019 from the INF Treaty (1987)—which called for the elimination of intermediate-range missiles (500 to 5,500 km)—citing Russia's violations and concerns over China's growing missile capabilities. In 2020, the U.S. also left the Open Skies Treaty, again citing Russian violations. At the same time, the United States launched a modernization process of its nuclear arsenal, which, according to Trump, was intended to strengthen American capabilities until nuclear states "come to their senses." However, despite Trump's historic meeting with North Korea's leader, his efforts to take concrete steps toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula failed. Adding to this record, in 2018, Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), which had been brokered by President Barack Obama. Additionally, Trump's attempts to bring China into negotiations to extend the New START Treaty—which limits the number of deployed nuclear warheads between the U.S. and Russia—were unsuccessful. The treaty was ultimately extended by the Biden administration and is set to expire in 2026. In summary, Trump's first term was marked by a retreat from nuclear disarmament and arms control measures. Instead, his administration prioritized nuclear arsenal modernization while maintaining its strategic rivalry with China.

Trump's current statements on nuclear disarmament (ND) and arms control (AC) must be viewed in the broader context of threats to the future of the NPT regime. Among these threats are:

- Iran's advancing nuclear program and its ongoing non-compliance with agreements made with the IAEA.
- North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT and its continued unmonitored nuclear development.
- Limited progress by five nuclear powers in reducing their arsenals, coupled with ongoing modernization efforts.
- Rising tensions between the United States, China, and Russia, which undermine the prospects for advancing AC agreements.
- The collapse of key arms control agreements, including the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty and uncertainty surrounding the future of New START.
- The development of new technologies, further complicating disarmament efforts.

Beyond these specific challenges, a fundamental question arises about the NPT treaty itself and the broader AC regime, both of which depend on US support for their continued viability.

Trump's concern over the destructive potential of nuclear weapons, his desire to advance disarmament, his criticism of the massive budgets allocated to expanding nuclear stockpiles,

alongside his call to renew negotiations on these issues with Russia and China, and his interest in engaging with Iran on the nuclear issue, as well as his stated intention to address nuclear matters after resolving other pressing conflicts—all of these should compel him to create the necessary conditions to achieve his goal.

However, Trump's approach has contributed to a process that could lead to nuclear proliferation. The uncertainty he has created regarding the future of transatlantic relations—particularly concerning the credibility of US nuclear deterrence, namely the nuclear umbrella extended to its European allies—has shocked US allies in Europe. This uncertainty has been amplified by the war in Ukraine and the threat posed by Russia, as well as by the formative experience of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his meeting with Trump at the White House, which further intensified European anxieties over security and abandonment fears. It is worth noting that signs of a shift in transatlantic relations had already emerged during Trump's previous administration, but European nations failed to fully grasp the message. Furthermore, President Biden worked to restore relations to the familiar framework that had existed for decades. For years, both Democratic and Republican administrations have repeatedly called for a more balanced distribution of defense spending between the United States and Europe, though these appeals largely fell on deaf ears in Europe. Trump, however, conveyed this message in an exceptionally blunt manner.

The recognition that the United States under Trump's administration is not a reliable ally has given renewed momentum to French President Emmanuel Macron's proposal—one he has been unsuccessfully promoting since 2017—to establish "strategic autonomy" or a "strategic Europe" aimed at gradually reducing Europe's security dependence on the U.S. Alongside efforts to strengthen conventional military capabilities and build an industrial-defense infrastructure, Macron has also proposed launching a strategic discussion on expanding nuclear deterrence to European allies as part of addressing global threats in general, and the threat from Russia in particular. His proposal was welcomed by Germany's incoming chancellor, Friedrich Merz, in contrast to outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who was reluctant to engage in such a dialogue. Poland's president praised the initiative, while simultaneously inviting the U.S. to station nuclear weapons on Polish soil, a move that was echoed by leaders of the Baltic states.

The uncertainty surrounding the credibility of the US commitment to nuclear deterrence has not gone unnoticed in Japan—where Trump has recently raised questions about the bilateral defense agreement—or in South Korea. The possibility of developing independent nuclear capabilities has become part of the security discourse in both countries, and it is reasonable to assume that the uncertainty over US commitments, combined with threats from China and North Korea, will add a sense of urgency to their considerations regarding nuclear weapons development. Moreover, if countries that have long relied on the US nuclear umbrella decide to build their own nuclear capabilities, it would likely legitimize similar moves by other nations that have been contemplating this path. It is possible that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, and other countries would reassess their positions on nuclear development in response to these shifting dynamics.

Instead of engaging in a serious dialogue with his European allies and clarifying the necessary adjustments for a fairer transatlantic burden-sharing—while ensuring the continued US commitment to NATO’s collective security and nuclear deterrence (including Article 5 of the NATO treaty)—Trump chose to cast doubt on the future of the partnership that had long been based on shared values and collective defense. The need to prevent a vacuum in nuclear deterrence is now driving European nations toward the only available option at present—expanding the French (and British) nuclear umbrella, although its practical feasibility remains to be tested. To avoid becoming a secondary player in the emerging global order, Europe will need to build not only a strong economic and technological foundation but also a credible security capability—meaning nuclear deterrence. In the future, soft power alone will not suffice. Until such a capability is established—if at all—Europe will have to continue relying on U.S. nuclear deterrence. However, in Trump’s worldview, where shared transatlantic values are no longer a priority, America’s willingness to provide Europe with a nuclear umbrella and security services will be transactional. In other words, NATO members will have to pay for the security guarantees the U.S. provides.

Even if Trump, in his unpredictable manner, ultimately expresses a commitment to NATO, it is doubtful that this would restore confidence in the credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence. Trump’s actions have pushed European nations—perhaps permanently—out of their long-standing comfort zone, where they had relied on American security guarantees for decades. This shift could have profound implications for the global nuclear order. In essence, if America’s allies must now seek independent nuclear deterrence options, detached from the U.S., Trump has actively undermined his own stated goal of nuclear disarmament. Instead of working to prevent nuclear proliferation, his policies may ultimately encourage it. It is highly questionable whether this development serves the national security interests of the United States.

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