

NUCLEAR AGE: INTERNATIONAL RELATION

NEWS: The third nuclear age

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

The Third Nuclear Age marks a shift from deterrence to nuclear coercion, with norm erosion, tactical weapon redeployment, and arms control collapse amid multipolar insecurity. This phase is driven by strategic competition among powers like China, Russia, and the U.S., raising global proliferation risks.

Introduction: Understanding the Third Nuclear Age

- The Third Nuclear Age refers to a new era of nuclear politics marked by **strategic instability, nuclear coercion, and erosion of established arms control norms.**
- Unlike earlier phases focused on deterrence and disarmament, this phase is characterized by **nuclear weapons being used as instruments of power projection, strategic blackmail, and signaling.**
- This age emerges amidst **messy multipolarity, revived great power competition, and declining global commitment to arms control.**

Framework of Nuclear Ages: Comparative Historical Evolution

1. First Nuclear Age (Cold War Era)

- **Timeframe:** 1945–1991
- **Key Actors:** United States and Soviet Union (USSR)
- **Core Philosophy:** *Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)* — a doctrine where both powers refrained from using nuclear weapons due to guaranteed retaliation.
- **Characteristics:**
 - Bipolar strategic stability maintained through symmetrical arsenals.
 - Global nuclear warheads peaked at ~70,000.
 - Arms control initiatives included:
 - **SALT I & II (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks)**
 - **INF Treaty (1987)**
 - **New START Treaty** (will expire in 2026).
 - Aim: Avoid war through stability via deterrence and bilateral agreements.

2. Second Nuclear Age (Post-Cold War Optimism)

- **Timeframe:** 1991–2010s
- **Key Belief:** Optimism about eventual global disarmament.
- **Developments:**
 - **Global Zero movement, CTBT (Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty), and NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) extensions.**
 - Emergence of new regional nuclear powers such as India and Pakistan.
 - While disarmament was spoken of, **modernisation of nuclear arsenals quietly continued.**
 - **Inequality of NPT** persisted — Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) did not fully comply with Article VI disarmament obligations.
- **Result:** An uneasy acceptance of nuclear weapons coupled with stagnant disarmament efforts.

3. Third Nuclear Age (Contemporary Period)

- **Current Characteristics:**
 - **Messy multipolarity** with multiple nuclear powers acting outside collective norms.
 - Rising **insecurity and distrust** among major powers.
- **Major Strategic Shifts:**
 - **China:** Rapid nuclear expansion with ~600 warheads now (tripled in recent years).
 - **Russia:** Movement of tactical nuclear weapons to **Belarus** as a coercive tactic.
 - **NATO:** Internal debate on strategic deterrence; **France and UK** contemplating independent deterrents.
 - **Israel:** Alleged unsanctioned nuclear strike on Iranian facilities — a **clear breach of international norms** without global condemnation.
- **Trend:** Shift from passive deterrence to **proactive nuclear coercion.**

Violation of International Norms and Treaties

- **Israel's Strike on Iran:**
 - Goes against the **non-proliferation spirit of NPT** and global diplomatic conduct.
 - Absence of condemnation by major powers reflects weakening of norm-based global order.
- **Russia's Ukraine Posturing:**

- Use of nuclear threats to influence military outcomes rather than prevent escalation.
- Shows a shift from **nuclear deterrence to nuclear compellence** (i.e., using threat of nuclear use to compel changes).

Geopolitical Drivers of the Third Nuclear Age

- **China:** Aspires for a “strategic counterbalance” to the U.S., strengthening nuclear capabilities to gain leverage.
- **Russia:** Uses nuclear rhetoric for **geopolitical assertiveness**, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Arctic.
- **United States:** Under Trump, **retreated from global leadership** in arms control; subsequent **uncertainty in NATO** strategy.
- **Europe:** Facing insecurity post-Brexit and Ukraine war, **France and the UK** revisiting their nuclear policies.
- **Global Trend:** All major powers pursuing **nuclear modernisation**:
 - U.S. programme estimated at **\$1.5–2 trillion** over the next 30 years.
 - Russia and China heavily investing in **hypersonic and low-yield nuclear capabilities**.

Security and Deterrence Concerns

- **Tactical Nuclear Weapons Redeployment:**
 - Increased reliance on **battlefield nuclear weapons** increases likelihood of use in conflicts.
 - Blurs the line between conventional and nuclear war.
- **Active Threat Use:**
 - Leaders are more open about using nuclear threats for gains — a dangerous precedent.
- **Erosion of Arms Control Treaties:**
 - **New START Treaty** set to expire in 2026 with no successor treaty in negotiation.
 - No comprehensive treaty in place involving **China**, despite its growing arsenal.
- **Proliferation Risks:**
 - Rising instability may trigger proliferation in **West Asia (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia)** or **East Asia (e.g., Japan, South Korea)** if nuclear security guarantees appear unreliable.

Conclusion

- The Third Nuclear Age represents a **dangerous departure** from previous doctrines of stability and deterrence.
- The increasing use of nuclear weapons for **coercion, political signalling, and deterrent erosion** threatens global peace.
- With **arms control regimes collapsing, norms weakening, and strategic mistrust growing**, the world stands at the cusp of **a new and volatile nuclear reality** — demanding urgent diplomatic, normative, and technological interventions.

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