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CANADA AND THE MIDDLE POWER CHALLENGE

AMIDST THE RUINS OF AGREEMENTS: CAN ARMS CONTROL BE REVIVED?

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Key points

- With New START expired, warhead numbers rising and nuclear threats normalized, the arms control architecture built over five decades has collapsed. It cannot be restored to what it was.
- The diplomatic machinery has stalled, but the technical infrastructure beneath it—IAEA safeguards and the CTBTO's monitoring network—still functions. That gap is where progress is possible.
- Practical gains lie in habits rather than architecture: behaviour-based restraint, binding commitments to keep humans in control of nuclear decisions, closing the CTBT low-yield verification gap, and a moratorium on weapons in space.
- Canada should abandon "going along to get along," join the TPNW, question allies on the legitimacy of extended and forward deterrence, and lead issue-based coalitions in the spirit of Prime Minister Carney's "variable geometry."

I. Framing the question

We find ourselves amidst the wreckage of a system that took generations to build and less than a generation to dismantle. It leaves us with no guard rails in a perilous world of some 12,000 nuclear weapons [1] and some 1,800 tonnes—1.8 million kilogrammes—of weapon-usable highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium, most of it outside any international safeguards.[2]

Arms control and disarmament is not just a technical regime of treaties and verification protocols. It is the institutional expression of a shared recognition that certain forms of destruction must stay off the table of statecraft. That recognition is now in doubt.

The question is not whether arms control can be restored to what it was. It cannot. The question is whether something fit for a different world—tripolar, AI-inflected and economically weaponized—can be built in its place. This brief argues that rebuilding on the old blueprint is a dead end. What is available is narrower, more practical and less comfortable—and middle powers, including Canada, have real work to do, provided we stop mistaking caution for credibility and have the courage to shed outdated foreign entanglements that come at the expense of our territorial security in the maritime and space domains.

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II. How we got here

The collapse has been cumulative, not sudden.

New START expired on 5 February 2026 with no successor. For the first time since 1972, the world's two largest nuclear arsenals sit under no legally binding numerical limit or verification at all. Moscow says it is informally observing the central limits; Washington declined to reciprocate.[3]

Modernization, not reduction, is now doctrine in Washington, Moscow and Beijing alike. China's stockpile has nearly doubled since 2020 to about 620 warheads, while Russia and the United States each still hold roughly 4,000 in their military stockpiles.[4] According to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the nine nuclear-armed States spent US$119 billion on their arsenals in 2025: US$3,768 every second, a 19 percent jump in a single year.[5]

Around this core, everything else has moved in the same direction at once: ill-conceived NATO enlargement and the war in Ukraine; illegal attacks on Iran's safeguarded nuclear facilities and the targeted killing—State terrorism with impunity, in my view—of its top leadership;[6] sanctions and "de-risking"; and the politicization of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The machinery still exists on paper. In practice it has stopped producing outcomes—but the technical infrastructure underneath it, IAEA safeguards and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO)'s monitoring network, still functions. The gap between broken diplomacy and intact technical capacity is where the argument of this brief lives.

III. The destabilizing landscape

Five current trends are actively reshaping, not just eroding, the landscape.

- **Nuclear threats are back as everyday statecraft**. Moscow ordered its nuclear forces onto a "special mode of combat duty" in February 2022,[7] and its November 2024 doctrine lowered the bar for use, treating a conventional attack by a non-nuclear-weapon State backed by a nuclear-armed one as a joint attack on Russia or its allies.[8] The United States, in its 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, also reserves the option of first use in "extreme circumstances."[9] Since February 2026 it has made civilization-ending and annihilation threats against Iran, interpreted by many as implying nuclear use.[10] The line between signalling and readiness to use grows thinner every year.
- **France's new posture.** President Macron's March 2026 "forward deterrence" (*dissuasion avancée*) doctrine increases France's warhead count for the first time since 1992, ends public disclosure of stockpile size, and opens the way to forward deployment of French nuclear-capable aircraft and structured consultations with eight European partners, while Paris retains sole command and control.[11] More warheads, more nodes, more exposure—and no more say for anyone outside the room.
- **A widening US–Russia–China rift over format, not just substance.** Washington wants multilateral, N5-style talks rather than a bilateral successor to New START Treaty; China rejects any trilateral framework, insisting that Washington and Moscow reduce first; Russia wants Britain and France folded in.[12] Narrowing that rift is now the precondition for any progress.
- **AI inside the decision loop.** Targeting platforms—Israel's Lavender and Gospel in Gaza,[13] the Pentagon's Palantir-built Maven Smart System in Iran [14]—generating thousands of algorithmically selected "aim points" with reportedly minimal human review are no longer hypothetical; we have seen their fatal civilian consequences. The same compression of decision time is now reaching early warning and nuclear command-and-control.

- **Weapons in space.** On 14 September 2026 a Rubicon was crossed when US Air Force Secretary Troy Meink confirmed that the United States now has space control weapons on orbit—which a Space Force spokesperson said can be used offensively as well as defensively.[15] The Outer Space Treaty bans only weapons of mass destruction in orbit; conventional space weapons remain unregulated and unverifiable.[16]

IV. Deterrence on trial

Nuclear threats and forward deterrence raise a basic question: on what basis do States that rely on nuclear deterrence claim it is legitimate? The sharpest recent answer comes from Alexander Kmentt, the Austrian diplomat who was a principal architect of the Humanitarian Impacts Initiative and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), writing in *Frontiers in Political Science*.[17] Four points matter here:

- **The burden of proof.** If the consequences of deterrence failure are global and irreversible, the burden should rest not on those who question deterrence but on those who claim it can manage these risks indefinitely.
- **A legitimacy problem.** Deterrence distributes risk and consequences across the world while concentrating the decision in a handful of capitals.
- **Threat and readiness are inseparable.** That is why the TPNW prohibits not only use but the threat of use: a credible threat of catastrophic harm cannot be held apart from the readiness to carry it out.
- **Deterrence is not synonymous with security.** The alternative is security as "protection *from* nuclear weapons rather than protection *through* nuclear weapons."

Preventing nuclear war is a common interest of the highest order—and the working basis for the behaviour-based measures that follow.

V. Putting arms control back on track: New approaches

Waiting for the old architecture to return is not a strategy. Six things are available now.

1. REPLACE ARCHITECTURE WITH HABITS

No new treaty is coming in this decade, or even in the next. What is achievable is leader-level engagement paired with standing technical expert working groups developing notification measures, hotlines and verification concepts—the way Reagan and Gorbachev worked before either trusted the other enough to sign anything. Geneva's enduring product was the Soviet-US declaration of 21 November 1985:

> *...a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought... [recognizing the] importance of preventing any war between [the two sides], whether nuclear or conventional... not seek to achieve military superiority... to prevent an arms race in space and to terminate it on Earth.*[18]

We need a similar N5 joint statement—an updated version of the January 2022 Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races.[19]

2. SHIFT FROM COUNTING WARHEADS TO GOVERNING BEHAVIOUR

A numbers-based treaty assumes a level of trust that no longer exists among three parties. A behaviour-based approach does not: reciprocal notification of missile tests, commitments against hair-trigger launch postures and—critically—the same logic applied to cyber, AI and space, where no numerical limit would make sense. In space, start with a moratorium on further deployment and testing of orbital weapons and on destructive anti-satellite tests, together with a return to the 1980s framework of "Nuclear and Space Talks."

3. KEEP A SENTIENT, ACCOUNTABLE HUMAN AT THE CENTRE OF NUCLEAR DECISIONS

This is non-negotiable. The Nobel Laureates' Rome Declaration of July 2026 held that no algorithm should sit at the centre of decisions on which humanity's survival depends.[20] France, the United Kingdom and the United States have each made declaratory statements to that effect; that convergence should become a binding, verifiable pledge—building on the November 2024 Biden–Xi affirmation in Lima [21]—that no State will delegate nuclear launch authority to an AI system. To make it operational:

- First, a joint N5 statement affirming positive, sentient human control over nuclear employment decisions.
- Second, N5 AI Nuclear Risk Management Centres, modelled on the 1999 US–Russia Center for Year 2000 Strategic Stability.[22] Linked national centres would notify AI-related malfunctions and suspected spoofing, extend launch and test notification, pool lessons on how AI systems fail, and give experts a channel to clarify an ambiguous event within minutes, without disclosing anyone's command-and-control design.
- Third, bring industry in. Canada has joined the *Call for Control of Frontier AI Models* launched by Finland and Norway on 21 September 2026, during the UN General Assembly's high-level week.[23] Canada should now foster human-centric AI governance and convene a standing Track 1.5 dialogue joining frontier AI companies, cyber and AI security experts and officials from nuclear-armed States on red-teaming and testing standards for high-consequence uses.

4. MIDDLE POWERS MUST STOP "GOING ALONG TO GET ALONG"

Prime Minister Carney told Davos in January 2026 that we are living through "*a rupture, not a transition*," and warned, "*if we're not at the table, we're on the menu*."[24] The naïve, elusive consensus-seeking bridge-building approach of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) and the Stockholm Initiative has run its course, as has Canada's entanglement with European security. Where is the logic of Canada, with 41.4 million people and a GDP of US$2.19 trillion, underwriting the security of a European NATO of about 600 million people and a US$24.6 trillion GDP—fourteen times our population and eleven times our economy?[25] The alternative is what Carney called "*variable geometry*": ad hoc coalitions, multilateralism by design, around achievable items such as the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)'s low-yield verification technology, an AI–human control pledge, and non-weaponization of space.

5. REPAIR THE MULTILATERAL MACHINERY

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) review process has gone sixteen years without an agreed outcome.[26] Permanence is not broken; accountability is. Future review conferences should pair a short political reaffirmation with technical consensus recommendations.

T**he CTBT at thirty.** With open talk of resuming tests, the N5 should reaffirm their moratoria, and middle powers should lead on closing the verification gap below roughly 500 tonnes—the level above which the CTBTO says its network reliably detects explosions.[27]

Concretely, at the CTBTO Preparatory Commission's Working Group B Canada should make low-yield detection and characterization, including the use of AI, a standing agenda item, and press the Provisional Technical Secretariat to adopt an open framework for AI in verification—one in which algorithms support but never replace the judgement of expert analysts and States. The N5 hold what no algorithm can generate: ground truth. Canada should urge them to release historic waveform and site data through the International

Data Centre, to conduct jointly observed calibration shots with conventional explosives near former test areas, and to open reciprocal, voluntary confidence-building visits to their test sites, following the Nevada transparency visits the United States hosted from 2023.[28] The disputed 22 June 2020 event near Lop Nur shows why: at yields of tens to hundreds of tonnes, possibly decoupled, such questions must be settled on evidence, not argument or innuendo.[29] There should be no quiet way to test.

The UN machinery. If the Conference on Disarmament stays blocked, the UN General Assembly's First Committee should mandate majority-decided negotiations and convene a Fourth Special Session on Disarmament (UNSSOD IV)—and the Office for Disarmament Affairs needs urgent reform.

A realistic marker of success within three years would comprise: a reaffirmed, even if informal, Washington–Moscow warhead ceiling; a first trilateral technical exchange including Beijing; a cross-camp statement keeping AI out of nuclear launch decisions; a working N5 channel for notifying AI-related incidents in early warning; and a middle-power coalition running an open AI data-fusion challenge on International Monitoring System (IMS) data—all without anyone signing a treaty they are not ready to sign.

6. REVISIT THE 1972 BASIC PRINCIPLES: TOWARD A NEW TRILATERAL FRAMEWORK

The 1972 Basic Principles of Relations between the United States and the USSR were not an arms control instrument but a political framework—mutual restraint, avoiding confrontations that risk war, no unilateral advantage—that gave technical arms control its scaffolding.[30] No equivalent exists today, and none has ever existed among three parties. A new one must be conceived as trilateral from the outset.

VI. The TPNW Review Conference: What states should strive for

States parties meet in New York from 30 November to 4 December 2026 for the TPNW's first Review Conference, with South Africa presiding.[31] The metric of success should not be how many more States sign.

- **Make the pathways real.** Convert four years of Article 4 work on verified disarmament into a tested pathway for nuclear-armed and nuclear-reliant States to join.
- **Fund the trust fund.** Put real money into the victim-assistance and environmental-remediation trust fund.
- **Put the security concerns of non-nuclear States on the table.** The 2025 report finds that nuclear weapons themselves generate insecurity through risks of use, accident, miscalculation, coercion and environmental harm.[32] Deterrence-reliant States should be visibly challenged to answer it—and Canada, a member of a nuclear alliance, should not flinch.
- **Treat complementarity, not competition, with the NPT as the strategic choice.** With three NPT Review Conferences failed in a row, the TPNW is increasingly the only forum producing consensus text on nuclear weapons. Deterrence-reliant States should be invited to engage as observers, as Germany, Norway, Belgium and the Netherlands did in 2022 [33]—and even to consider accession.

VII. The Big Picture

Arms control has collapsed before and been rebuilt before. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis produced the hotline and, within a decade, the Partial Test Ban Treaty, the NPT, the Basic Principles, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Treaty (SALT I) and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. But revival never came from treaties alone; it came from a prior, harder recognition among the major powers that unconstrained competition serves no one. That recognition does not exist today, and middle powers cannot manufacture it.

What we can do is what Prime Minister Carney argued: act together anyway. For Canada, in addition to the measures outlined above, that means reviving Global Affairs Canada's verification research and recapitalizing our academic and civil society non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament (NACD) sector, funded in part by redirecting support now flowing to US and European recipients.

Canada has a proud record of stimulating the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (the 1995 Shannon mandate),[34] the Open Skies Treaty, the NPT's indefinite extension and the Ottawa mine-ban treaty. It is time again for Canada to step forward.

VIII. Recommendations for Canada

1. **Liberate itself** from the cobwebs of failed coalitions such as the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI), "stepping stones" and Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND).
2. **Boldly join the TPNW.**
3. **Press NATO allies, France included,** to answer the burden-of-proof question about extended and forward deterrence.
4. **Take the lead on "fail-safe" for AI**: an N5 human-control statement, AI Nuclear Risk Management Centres, and a Track 1.5 dialogue with frontier AI companies.
5. **Convene a coalition on CTBT low-yield verification**—drawing on the IMS stations Canada hosts—to launch an AI data-fusion challenge and host a neutral technical dialogue open to nuclear-armed States.
6. **Make the case for a moratorium** pending a prohibition of the weaponization of space.

None of this is architecture. It is maintenance, and preparation, and the deliberate keeping-alive of technical and normative infrastructure long enough for the recognition to return. In this decade, it may be the only realistic initiative.

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