

THE STRATEGIC INTERREGNUM: MANAGING THE GREY AREAS FOLLOWING THE EXPIRY OF THE NEW START TREATY

Tinah Rakotoarimanga, member of the Bureau of Initiatives for Nuclear Disarmament (IDN)

We must view 5 February 2026 not merely as a [diplomatic deadline](#) but as the systemic breaking point of a sixty-year-old security model. The [expiry of the New START Treaty](#) between the United States and Russia is not merely the end of the physical inspections required for its verification; it marks the dissolution of the ‘compensation layer’ that helped stabilise nuclear deterrence in the face of technological leaps.

Today, the priority is no longer to count the number of warheads, but to analyse the ability to interpret the adversary’s intentions in an environment that has become opaque.

We are shifting from an [assessment based on verification](#) (telemetric data, on-site inspections) to planning based on inference under uncertainty. This transition is all the more perilous as it is taking place against a backdrop of ‘structural lag’: whilst our diplomatic institutions still operate on timescales of several months, [strategic innovation](#)—driven by hypersonic technology, cyber and AI—now demands decision-making cycles measured in milliseconds.

Through this analysis, we will thus map out what survives in the ‘grey areas’ of arms control. We will explore how the erosion of legal frameworks gives way to a purely techno-systemic stability.

This shift forces military planners to revert to ‘[worst-case planning](#)’, whilst the inability to access telemetry data and conduct on-site inspections renders the practice of ‘[re-MIRving](#)’ – or the uploading of existing delivery systems – undetectable. MIRVing (from ‘Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicle’) involves equipping a missile with multiple nuclear warheads to increase the chances that some will reach their target. Technically, this latent expansion is ‘transparent’: delivery systems such as the American [Minuteman III](#) or [Trident II D5](#) missiles can have their payload multiplied exponentially without any visible structural changes, whilst the Russian [RS-28 Sarmat](#) has a throw-weight capable of overwhelming enemy defences with 10 to 15 independent warheads. In this context, stability is no longer a function of the quantity of declared weapons, but becomes closely dependent on the integrity of [vulnerable technical systems](#) (C3I or command, control, communications and intelligence, sensor networks) and the speed of technologies such as [hypersonic systems](#), which compress the time available for political deliberation to just a few minutes.

In this now [tripolar order](#), the question is no longer whether we can limit arms, but whether we can still make sense of the signals we are sending.

I. THE REMAINING ARCHITECTURE AS A MINIMAL SAFETY NET

1. What survives: risk-reduction mechanisms and stabilisation routines

The collapse of the transparency layer under New START does not signify a total absence of communication, but rather a retreat to a purely reactive crisis architecture. We observe that stability now rests on 'low-spectrum' mechanisms which, though limited, constitute the last barriers against accidental escalation.

- [Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres](#) (NRRCs): despite the treaty's expiry, the [direct communication structures](#) inherited from 1987 remain the central pillar of nuclear risk reduction. These centres enable the maintenance of critical information flows, particularly for the notification of strategic ballistic missile launches, thereby preventing routine tests from being interpreted as pre-emptive strikes.

- The survival of [tactical de-escalation protocols](#): agreements on the prevention of incidents at sea and in international airspace continue to govern close-quarters interactions between US and Russian forces. These stabilisation routines are essential for managing kinetic frictions which, in the absence of political dialogue, could serve as a trigger for an escalation to extremes.

- The interregnum of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a normative anchor: in what we term the '[interregnum of arms control](#)', the NPT remains the sole platform for multilateral dialogue between nuclear and non-nuclear powers. Although the erosion of the bilateral pillar undermines the credibility of disarmament, the NPT still exerts normative pressure which, under the control of the international community, curbs a relentless arms race and, combined with the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (signed by Washington, Moscow and Beijing but only ratified by France and the United Kingdom), makes a disorderly resumption of such tests politically difficult.

- The continued relevance of space launch notifications: the 1988 agreements on the notification of missile launches remain in force for technical reasons. In an environment where [space surveillance](#) is the new centre of gravity, these procedures make it possible to distinguish between a satellite deployment and an offensive ballistic trajectory, even though the [loss of telemetry data](#) under New START makes this distinction more tenuous.

What we are seeing here is an 'empty operationalisation'. The technical structures ('hotlines', notification centre) are still functioning, but they are disconnected from the political frameworks that gave them meaning. For a decision-maker, stability no longer depends on legal certainty but on the technical resilience of these few channels. If a cyber incident or human error overwhelms these lines, there is no longer a diplomatic buffer to slow down escalation.

2. Stability amid uncertainty: the return of 'worst-case planning'

We must acknowledge that the end of New START marks a shift from 'verified trust' to 'structural paranoia'. Without the [18 annual inspections](#) and the exchange of telemetry data, the security architecture no longer rests on observed facts, but on maximalist threat models.

- **The shift towards interference under uncertainty:** the disappearance of the "[Bilateral Consultative Commission](#)" (BCC), a bilateral body for crisis prevention or resolution, creates an analytical vacuum. Military planners can no longer distinguish between routine maintenance and an intentional build-up, which leads to widespread

'worst-case planning': as a precaution, each side must now assume that the adversary is deploying its maximum offensive capability.

- **The invisible threat of 'Re-MIRVing'**: this is the most unstable technical sticking point here. The ability to upload existing delivery systems is technically "transparent". Without visual access to the nuclear warheads fitted to the missiles, we must assume that the American Minuteman III and Russian RS-28 Sarmat are loaded to their maximum independent re-entry vehicle (MIRV) capacity, potentially increasing from 1 to 15 warheads per delivery system without any outward sign of change.
- **The erosion of shared interpretative frameworks**: New START provided a common glossary for interpreting the other side's movements. Today, this framework has been lost. In this context, a simple technical anomaly or a misunderstood exercise could be interpreted as a prelude to a strike, as the time to resolve such doubts has vanished with the transparency mechanism.

The danger here is therefore cognitive. 'Worst-case planning' is not a strategy of war; it is a response to blindness. For a decision-maker in 2026, the absence of proof (that the other side is not increasing its forces) becomes proof of absence (of security). We are no longer in a state of deterrence, but in a state of shadow management where the first to doubt triggers escalation.

II. THE GREY AREAS BEYOND CONTROL

1. Tactical weapons and capabilities beyond the ceiling: the 'black hole' of arms control

Our attention must no longer focus solely on intercontinental missile silos, but on the proliferation of non-strategic (or 'tactical') systems. Historically, New START covered only delivery systems with a range exceeding 5,500 km, i.e. strategic ones. This deliberate exclusion created a grey area where the most unstable delivery systems are now accumulating.

- **Capability asymmetry and the Russian stockpile**: Russia maintains a massive and diverse arsenal of approximately 2,000 non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW). These warheads can be deployed on a wide range of air, naval and land-based delivery systems, such as the Iskander-M (SS-26 Stone) system, whose dual capability (conventional/nuclear) and mobility radically complicate any attempt at early detection. However, it should be noted that in Russia, and probably now in Belarus as well, Russian warheads are not deployed on their delivery systems, which are sometimes located tens of kilometres away, which would allow time to detect their payload.
- **NATO's nuclear sharing**: in response, the United States maintains a limited number (around a hundred) of B61 gravity bombs deployed in five NATO countries (Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey). However, the modernisation of these warheads (B61-12 version), combined with the lack of transparency mechanisms, is perceived by Moscow as an escalation, reinforcing the need for increased technical surveillance.
- **Doctrinal ambiguity and the lowering of the threshold**: these systems introduce a major human risk: their integration into regional scenarios (the Baltic, the Black Sea) blurs the line between conventional and nuclear conflict. For a decision-maker, the

use of a [cruise missile such as the Russian Kalibr](#) during a crisis creates total uncertainty regarding the nature of the payload – whether nuclear or conventional – forcing a response based on the worst-case scenario. It is primarily for this reason that the 1987 INF Treaty, which was withdrawn from by Trump, prohibited all intermediate-range missiles (500 to 5,500 km), whether conventional or nuclear.

In the short term, this segment will become the very heart of strategic opacity. Without a dedicated transparency mechanism (such as the inspections that existed for strategic forces), we may witness a ‘tacticalisation’ of the threat. By 2027, the deployment of dual-capable cruise missiles in Europe and Asia will be the norm, not the exception. This means one thing: survival will no longer depend on knowing the total number of warheads, but on the ability to identify, in REAL TIME, the nature of the mission of a delivery vehicle already in flight. We are leaving the era of accounting and entering that of interpretation under extreme pressure.

2. Latent rearmament and the mechanics of potential: the era of ‘Re-MIRVing’

In a post-New START world, the threat no longer stems from the construction of new silos, but from the exploitation of the ‘residual capacity’ of already deployed delivery systems. This phenomenon, which we term [latent rearmament](#), allows for a sudden expansion of arsenals within a matter of months, rendering the current parity purely cosmetic.

- **The modularity of MIRV-equipped delivery systems:** most current strategic delivery systems have been ‘restricted’ [to comply with the 1,550-warhead ceiling](#) stipulated by New START. Without inspections, there is technically nothing to prevent the reinstallation of [multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle \(MIRV\)](#) delivery platforms. This process is technically seamless and virtually undetectable by satellite imagery.
- **The asymmetry in ‘throw-weight’:** Russia’s payload capacity exceeds that of the United States on heavy delivery systems, creating an imbalance in potential. The Russian [RS-28 Sarmat](#) can saturate a target area with 10 to 15 warheads, whereas the American response relies on the [flexibility of submarines](#).
- **The risk of a ‘breakout’:** the United States has a [massive reserve stockpile \(1,900 warheads\)](#) ready to be loaded onto the Triad’s delivery systems (air, land and sea), transforming a deterrence posture into a saturation strike posture.

Technical vulnerability matrix: loading potential (“uploading”)

Delivery System	Capacity under the Treaty	Theoretical maximum capacity	Risk factor
LGM-30G Minuteman III	1 warhead	3 warheads	Critical: the only US land-based ICBM; rapid rearmament of silos
Trident II D5 (SLBM)	~ 4 warheads	8 to 14 warheads	Major: massively increased second-strike capability at sea

RS-28 (Satan II)	Sarmat	Undetermined (opacity)	10 to 15 warheads	Extreme: designed to overwhelm anti-missile shields through saturation
Bombers (B-52H/B-21)		Counted as 1 warhead	20+ missiles / bombs	Systemic: unverified storage capacity at air bases

This table demonstrates that we are no longer operating within a stock-based logic, but a flow-based logic.

By 2026–2027, if no transparency measures are reinstated, NATO planners will have to incorporate a working assumption in which Russian forces have doubled their actual strike capability without adding a single launcher. For the person behind the screen, this means that the time available to resolve doubts about an alert signal becomes zero: we can no longer afford to wait for confirmation of the number of warheads in flight.

It is this mechanics of potential that makes the post-New START world intrinsically unstable: the threat now lies in the invisible.

3. Technological Disruption and the Compression of Strategic Time

If latent rearmament (MIRV) increases the density of the threat, then the advent of hypersonic delivery systems alters its temporal nature. We observe that these systems do not merely circumvent defences but effectively shatter the calculation models upon which nuclear stability has rested since 1960.

- The end of ballistic predictability: systems such as the [Chinese DF-17](#) or the [Russian Avangard glider](#) combine speeds exceeding Mach 5 (6,174 km/h) with atmospheric manoeuvrability. Unlike conventional ICBMs, their trajectory is no longer a predictable parabolic arc, but an unpredictable broken line that flies over the blind spots of [early warning radars](#).
- Radical compression of the decision window: the time-of-flight decision and uncertainty regarding the final target reduce the time for political deliberation to a window of 5 to 10 minutes. In a world without New START, where communication between heads of state is already impaired, this compression virtually eliminates any possibility of human verification or last-minute crisis diplomacy.
- [Disruption of early warning architectures](#): current detection systems, such as the US [SBIRS \(Space-Based Infrared System\)](#), are optimised to detect the massive thermal signature of a ballistic missile launch. Hypersonic gliders, operating lower in the atmosphere, create more ambiguous signals, forcing decision-makers to weigh up the risk of a ‘false alarm’ against that of an unstoppable decapitation strike.

Hypersonic technology is the driving force behind “[strategic decoupling](#)”. It is no longer the weapon that is destabilising, but the inability of our brains (and our institutions) to process information at this speed. By 2028, the systematic integration of these delivery systems will force nuclear powers to delegate part of the early warning role to automated systems or those enhanced by artificial intelligence (AI) to compensate for human slowness. This means

that peace will no longer depend on a treaty, but on the robustness of an algorithm capable (or not) of distinguishing a hypersonic glider from atmospheric background noise. We are entering the era of [algorithmic deterrence](#).

4. The French acceleration: towards 'advanced deterrence' and the end of transparency

With the New START framework having collapsed, France has just announced a major shift in stance. President Macron's [announcements of 2 March 2026](#) mark a break with the doctrine of 'strict sufficiency', moving towards a logic of capability competition and expanded sanctuary.

- **The end of arithmetic transparency:** for the first time, France is breaking with its tradition of transparency regarding the size of its arsenal (previously set at "fewer than 300 warheads"). This decision aligns with the global trend towards opacity, transforming the French arsenal into a strategic "black box" for its adversaries. Trump had already opted for this opacity in 2019 and Boris Johnson in 2021.
- **Capacity expansion and the technological leap:** President Macron has formalised the (unspecified) increase in the number of nuclear warheads and the launch of the "*L'Invincible*" programme, the first of the third-generation ballistic missile submarines (SNLE 3G) scheduled for 2036 and designed to remain in service until the 2090s (100 years after France joined the NPT!). This build-up is coupled with the development, alongside Berlin and London, of very long-range missiles to counter new European vulnerabilities.
- **The 'forward deterrence' doctrine:** France is now proposing to extend its 'nuclear umbrella' to eight European allies that have expressed interest (Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom, Sweden). This "forward deterrence" suggests the potential deployment of elements of the strategic force to allies and their participation in nuclear exercises, whilst continuing to grant the French President the monopoly on the decision to use them.

Noting that the "*rulebook* (implying treaties including the NPT) *has become a field of ruins*", Paris is opting for a headlong rush into capability expansion.

In the short term (2026–2027), this "forward deterrence" could well create unprecedented tensions within NATO and with Russia. The risk is that of a doctrinal clash: by deploying strategic assets among its allies, France is multiplying the "points of friction" where a tactical miscalculation could trigger a strategic response.

We are no longer in a phase of maintaining peace through law, but in a phase of survival through brute force. The post-New START world is not only tripolar (US-Russia-China), it is now fragmented, and each regional nuclear power (France, the UK) must reinvent its own decision-making autonomy in the face of a technological acceleration that no treaty can now restrain. The nuclear risk increases dangerously when the threshold for use is thus lowered.
