# Framework for Nuclear Risk Reduction

**Mains**: *GSII – International Relations*

## Why in News?

*Recently the U.S., Russia and China met at the November 19, 2026, Shenzhen APEC Summit and pledged cooperation on nuclear risk reduction following the expiry of the New START Treaty in February 2026.*

## What is the Historical Background of Nuclear Arms Control?

- **New START Treaty** – The 2010 U.S.–Russia treaty expired in February 2026, ending formal restrictions on their strategic nuclear arsenals.
- **Russia's Proposal** – Moscow offered to continue observing New START limits for another year if Washington reciprocated, but the U.S. demanded an improved agreement involving China.
- **Shenzhen Declaration** – The three powers agreed to pursue nuclear risk reduction, although verification mechanisms and timelines for further negotiations remain absent.

## What are the Divergent Positions of Major Nuclear Powers?

- **United States**
  - **China's Nuclear Expansion** – Washington is concerned about China's rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and limited transparency regarding its capabilities.
  - **Strategic Vulnerability** – The U.S. fears a potential strategic disadvantage if Russia and China coordinate their nuclear capabilities against it.
  - **Nuclear Testing** – U.S. allegations of secret Russian and Chinese low-yield nuclear tests and its own decision to resume nuclear testing have increased tensions**.**
  - **Negotiating Position** – Washington insists that China must participate in any future nuclear arms-control agreement.
- **Russia**
  - **Strategic Equality** – Nuclear arms control remains an important platform where Moscow is treated as Washington's equal despite its declining conventional military strength.
  - **China's Participation** – Russia has avoided pressuring China to join negotiations because of their strategic alignment.
  - **European Powers** – Moscow argues that Britain and France should eventually participate in nuclear arms-control negotiations.

    - **Credibility Concerns** – Russia suspended New START inspections in 2023 and withdrew its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).
- **China**
    - **Nuclear Asymmetry** – China possesses approximately 620 nuclear warheads, compared with over 5,000 each for the U.S. and Russia.
    - **Transparency Concerns** – Beijing fears that revealing its relatively smaller arsenal could expose it to a potential disarming first strike.
    - **Missile Defence** – U.S. missile defence capabilities could weaken China's retaliatory nuclear capabilities.
    - **Nuclear Doctrine** – China follows a no-first-use policy and wants its nuclear doctrine and missile defence concerns included in discussions.
    - **Strategic Distrust** – The U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement in 2018 and its subsequent military strikes against Iran have deepened Chinese mistrust.

## What are the Major Challenges to Global Nuclear Risk Reduction?

- **Strategic Rivalries** – Taiwan tensions, the Russia–Ukraine war and the U.S.–Israel conflict with Iran complicate negotiations and increase nuclear escalation risks.
- **Nuclear Asymmetry** – Differences in nuclear stockpiles make equal restrictions unacceptable to China and complicate a trilateral agreement.
- **Lack of Transparency** – Secrecy surrounding nuclear capabilities, testing and military doctrines increases mistrust among major powers.
- **Weak Verification Mechanisms** – The Shenzhen declaration lacks clear compliance-monitoring arrangements, timelines and enforceable commitments.
- **Emerging Technologies** – Artificial intelligence integration into military command and control systems increases the possibility of miscalculations and unintended nuclear escalation.
- **Declining Arms-Control Frameworks** – The erosion of existing agreements and disagreements over nuclear testing weaken international confidence in non-proliferation efforts.

## What Measures are Required for Nuclear Risk Reduction?

- **Adopt a Practical and Gradual Approach**
    - **Avoid Unrealistic Demands** – The U.S. should abandon demands for equal nuclear limits on China and address its concerns regarding nuclear doctrine and missile defence.
    - **Restore Bilateral Restrictions –** The U.S. and Russia should restore limits on their nuclear arsenals without waiting for China's participation.
    - **Gradual Chinese Engagement** – China should participate in confidence-building measures and progressively improve transparency regarding its nuclear capabilities.
- **Four Priority Confidence-Building Measures**
    - **Human Control** – Ensure that humans retain complete control over nuclear launch decisions, preventing autonomous AI-driven nuclear escalation.
    - **Crisis Communication** – Establish reliable military hotlines to facilitate

immediate communication during geopolitical crises and prevent misunderstandings.
    - **Launch Notifications** – Make advance notifications of missile launches a standard practice to reduce misinterpretation of military activities.
    - **Testing Moratorium –** Maintain a moratorium on explosive nuclear testing, requiring Washington to reconsider its decision to resume nuclear tests.
- **Strengthen Diplomatic Engagement**
    - **Regular Dialogue** – Establish sustained high-level exchanges among the three nuclear powers to discuss strategic stability and crisis prevention.
    - **Gradual Confidence Building** – Prioritise achievable risk-reduction measures rather than waiting for complete trust or a binding trilateral treaty.
    - **Broader Participation** – Consider the concerns of Britain and France in future negotiations on global nuclear arms control.

## What is the Significance for Global Security?

- **Prevents Nuclear Escalation** – Communication mechanisms and launch notifications can reduce accidental nuclear conflicts.
- **Preserves Strategic Stability** – Confidence-building measures can prevent arms races and reduce uncertainty regarding nuclear intentions.
- **Addresses Technological Risks** – Human oversight can minimise the dangers associated with AI integration into nuclear command systems.
- **Strengthens Non-Proliferation** – Renewed cooperation among major nuclear powers can reinforce international nuclear disarmament efforts.
- **Revives Multilateral Diplomacy** – The Shenzhen initiative provides an opportunity to rebuild trust and strengthen global security institutions.

## What lies ahead?

- The Shenzhen declaration represents a modest but significant beginning towards rebuilding global nuclear arms control.
- Instead of waiting for complete trust and an ideal trilateral treaty, the U.S., Russia and China must prioritise practical confidence-building measures, sustained dialogue.

## Quick facts

| Year | Treaty / Agreement | Major provisions and significance |
|---|---|---|
| 1968 | Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) | Prevents the spread of nuclear weapons; promotes peaceful nuclear energy and pursues nuclear disarmament.<br>*Note* – ***India***, ***Pakistan***, ***Israel*** *and* ***South Sudan*** *are not parties.* |
| 1985 | Treaty of Rarotonga | Established the South Pacific as a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone. |

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| 1996 | Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) | Prohibits all nuclear explosions, including underground tests; not yet entered into force. |
| 2010 | New START Treaty | Limited U.S. and Russian deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 each. |
| 2015 | Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (**agreement**) | Iran nuclear agreement aimed at restricting Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief |

**Reference**

[The Hindu| Framework For Nuclear Risk Reduction Cannot Wait]

