

University of Minho

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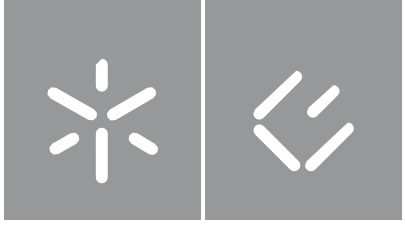
Nuclear Strategies between the U.S. and Russia: A Case Study on the New START Treaty

October of 2025

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Nuclear Strategies Between the U.S. and Russia: A Case Study on the New START Treaty

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Master in International Relations

Work carried out under the supervision of

Professor Sandra Dias Fernandes

October of 2025

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity and I confirm that I have not used plagiarism or any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration.

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University of Minho, School of Economics, Management and Political Science, October of 2025

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Nuclear Strategies between the U.S. and Russia: A Case Study on the New START Treaty

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the dynamics of nuclear arms control between the U.S. and Russia as a central framework for deterrence and balance of power. Representing 90% of the world's nuclear weapons, these two states play a decisive role in the stability of arms control frameworks, although they have proven increasingly fragile. Through an analysis of strategies related to nuclear arms control, this investigation delves into the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) as a central case study. With a timeframe from 2009 to 2023, the study examines how modernization programs and changing strategic positions shaped engagement with arms control. Guided by the theoretical lens of Neoclassical realism, this study adopts a comparative approach to evaluate the strategic relevance of New START in maintaining deterrence and reducing nuclear capabilities. The research shows that the treaty provided a framework for arms reduction while simultaneously allowing military modernization that increased the destructive power and sophistication of the nuclear arsenal. This reflects the broader complexities of the balance of power in the post-Cold War security environment. Neoclassical realism provides a framework for understanding arms control in the context of U.S. and Russia competition and their roles in managing escalation and preserving the balance of power. The findings demonstrate that these divergent perceptions of power shaped each state's commitment to treaty obligations and the long-term viability of arms control. The investigation demonstrates that arms control regimes can constrain and intensify nuclear competition, demonstrating the dual role of New START in shaping global stability.

Keywords: New START, U.S., Russia, Nuclear Deterrence, Arms Control

Estratégias Nucleares entre os E.U.A e a Rússia: Um Estudo de Caso sobre o Acordo New START

RESUMO ANALÍTICO

Esta dissertação analisa a evolução do controlo de armamentos nucleares entre os Estados Unidos e a Rússia, enquadrando-o nas dinâmicas de dissuasão e equilíbrio de poder. Estes dois países, que detêm cerca de 90% das armas nucleares mundiais, têm um papel decisivo na estabilidade dos mecanismos de limitação armamentista, ainda que estes se revelem cada vez mais frágeis. A investigação centra-se no Novo Tratado de Redução de Armas Estratégicas (New START), utilizado como estudo de caso central. O período analisado, de 2009 a 2023, permite compreender de que forma os programas de modernização e as mudanças nas posições estratégicas influenciaram a forma como ambos os países se envolveram nas negociações e na implementação do tratado. O estudo, sustentado na perspetiva teórica do realismo neoclássico, adota uma abordagem comparativa para avaliar a relevância estratégica do New START na manutenção da dissuasão e na redução das capacidades nucleares. Os resultados mostram que o tratado criou um quadro de redução de armamentos, mas também abriu espaço à modernização militar, aumentando o poder destrutivo e a sofisticação dos arsenais. Isto reflete as complexidades do equilíbrio de poder no período pós-Guerra Fria. O realismo neoclássico ajuda a compreender o processo de controlo e gestão nuclear no contexto da rivalidade entre os Estados Unidos e a Rússia, bem como o modo como ambos procuram gerir a escalada e preservar o equilíbrio estratégico. A análise demonstra que as diferentes perceções de poder influenciaram o grau de compromisso de cada Estado com o tratado e, em última instância, a sustentabilidade do próprio regime de controlo de armas. A investigação demonstra que os regimes de controlo de armas nucleares podem simultaneamente constranger e intensificar a competição nuclear, evidenciando o duplo papel do New START na configuração da estabilidade global.

Palavras-chave: Novo START, EUA, Rússia, Dissuasão Nuclear, Controlo de Armas

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile
ALCM	Air-launched Cruised Missile
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
ERI	European Reassurance Initiative
EU	European Union
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
IL	International Law
IR	International Relations
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015)
MAD	Mutual Assured Destruction
MIRV	Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle
NAC	Nuclear Arms Control
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NRC	NATO-Russia Council
NSS	National Security Strategy (2017)
NSS	Nuclear Security Summit (2010)
New START	New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (2010)

NPR	Nuclear Posture Review (2010, 2018, 2022)
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
SLBM	Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile
SSBN	Ballistic Missile Submarine
SORT	Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (2002)
START I	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (1991)
START II	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (1993)
TNW	Tactical Nuclear Weapons
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US(A)	United States (of America)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

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INTRODUCTION

I. Theme and Justification

Historical Framework: The Advent of the Nuclear Era

The development of the atomic bomb in 1945 marked the beginning of a balance of power between the U.S. and Soviet Union, the two major victorious powers of World War II (WWII), following groundbreaking scientific advancements in atomic disintegration and the energy it released. The U.S. demonstrated its nuclear capability through the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which led to Japan's surrender, effectively ending WWII. In 1949, the Soviet Union showcased its nuclear capabilities with its first atomic explosion in Kazakhstan (Romei, 2020).

The alliance established during WWII between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was a consequence of their mutual struggle against Nazism. After victory, the competition re-emerged in the relationship between the two superpowers. This configuration of the international system, opposing the capitalist and communist models, resulted in a bipolarization of the balance of power and a race to develop nuclear and conventional arms (Woolf, 2021). These two distinct ideologies represented hegemonic, political, and economic interests that first clashed in Europe and later in the broader international context (Bidgood, 2023).

The new circumstances of international politics led then President Harry Truman to adopt a new approach to American foreign and defense policies (Modebadze, 2019). The new U.S. national strategy was based on a pragmatic geopolitical vision aimed at securing control over three of the world's industrial poles (the U.S., Western Europe, and Japan), excluding the fourth pole: the Soviet Union. During this period, the U.S. officially adopted the containment doctrine, whose primary objective was to contain and isolate the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Leffler, 1991), preventing the expansion of its allied network beyond the Eurasian landmass. This strategy also facilitated the creation of the European Union (EU) and the consolidation of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), shaping the defense strategy of the Western bloc (Leffler, 1991). The American strategy in Europe was also based on support for multilateral international cooperation organizations, including military alliances, to maintain European coordination. After all, Europe was the strategic front of the Cold War.

Conversely, the USSR, under Josef Stalin's leadership, responded to the American strategy by implementing policies to strengthen its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe (Leffler, 1991). The Soviet strategy consolidated communist power by coercing countries within its sphere of influence to adopt political regimes aligned with the Soviet model. This strategy was materialized through the creation of the Warsaw Pact.

Although the U.S. and the USSR under no circumstances engaged in direct conflict (due to nuclear deterrence), the Americans possessed notable strategic supremacy and atomic dominance (Monteiro, 2008). According to Fernandes (2025) nuclear deterrence “it is based on the idea that the possession of nuclear weapons by a State can prevent others from attacking it, due to the threat of a devastating nuclear retaliation.” According to Acton (2018), the technological and scientific advancements of both the U.S. and the USSR primarily aimed to secure hegemonic dominance. This scenario provoked shifts in international alignments and patterns of influence (Gould-Davies, 2023). During this period, which lasted approximately forty years, the international system was on the brink of collapse. The nuclear arsenals of both superpowers had a capacity to destroy the planet.

In this context, the "balance of terror" emerged as a crucial tool, measuring the intensity of concern over supreme and vital interests, determining each side's risks, and regulating efforts to mobilize resources (Rogers, Korda, and Kristensen, 2022). According to James (2022, p.524), the balance of terror is defined as "a state of equilibrium in the possession of nuclear weapons by which both ideological powers could destroy each other."

The evolution of the nuclear program was profoundly felt on the international stage, marking a rupture and irreversible transformation of global structures (Kühn, Shetty, and Sinovets, 2018). By 1960, the world was on the verge of a possible nuclear war following the discovery of a Soviet missile base in Cuba (Bernstein, 1980). This situation heightened tensions between the U.S. and the USSR, leading to a significant crisis and a clearer awareness of the need for a specific approach to nuclear threats. American President John F. Kennedy demanded the suspension of missile installations in Cuba in exchange for the U.S. lifting its naval blockade of the island, alongside assurances of non-aggression (Modebadze, 2019). This placed the USSR in a position requiring an urgent response. Khrushchev acted swiftly, agreeing to American demands while responding to Kennedy’s secret message, expressing satisfaction with the promise to withdraw

U.S. missiles from Turkey and ensuring that these guarantees would remain confidential (Bernstein, 1980).

Following the resolution of this crisis, a negotiation-oriented attitude was adopted, re-establishing East-West relations and ushering in a phase of detente (Monteiro, 2008). This phase resulted in the management of tensions through detente, involving diplomatic maneuvers that acknowledged fundamental differences in national goals and interests while seeking to manage them. These developments created the conditions for initiating the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) negotiations, enabling cooperation between the two powers and the beginning of arms control measures (Bidgood, 1980). None of the belligerant parties openly challenged the other's sphere of influence.

The policy of detente yielded significant outcomes in the realm of strategic arms control agreements, particularly regarding nuclear weapons and Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). In May 1972, the SALT negotiations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union were initiated with the objective of limiting nuclear arsenals. The treaty was signed on behalf of the U.S. by President Richard Nixon and, on behalf of the Soviet Union, by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Leonid Brezhnev (SALT, 1972). In this new strategic context, diplomacy and international negotiation became essential instruments for the pursuit and defense of national interests. SALT I (1972) agreement included two essential documents related to Nuclear Arms Control (NAC): the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and the Interim Agreement on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. Although the signing of this agreement, in conjuction with these two documents, represented a significant step toward limiting nuclear arms, it did not result in the reduction of existing nuclear arsenals. Instead, it merely sought to impose limits on the further development and deployment of strategic nuclear delivery systems.

According to the agreements (1972), the U.S. was limited to a maximum of 710 SLBM and no more than 44 modern ballistic missile submarines. Similarly, the USSR was limited to a maximum of 950 SLBM launchers and no more than 62 modern ballistic missile submarines. SALT I (1972) also allowed both nuclear powers to bring additional SLBM launchers into service (656 for the U.S. and 740 for the USSR) on the condition that these would serve as replacements for an equivalent number of older launchers. They were also allowed to retain ICBM launchers (1054 for

the U.S. and 1618 for the USSR). This meant modernization of nuclear arsenal was permitted, but the expansion was not.

As a result, while the number of launch systems remained stabilized, the overall number of nuclear warheads continued to grow significantly during the 1970s (see Annex 1. page 88). This increase was due to the ongoing development of Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle (MIRV) systems. This reflected a clear strategic investment in scientific, technological, and military innovation, which translated directly into a more sophisticated weaponry (Monteiro, 2008). Moreover, this evolution in nuclear capability underscored the limitations of SALT I, making it necessary to negotiate a new agreement that would not only regulate delivery vehicles but also adress nuclear modernization.

These developments resulted in SALT II negotiations, in 1979, held this time under U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and, once again, General Secretay of CPSU Leonid Brezhnev (SALT II, 1979). The negotiations focused less on reducing existing stockpiles and more on establishing parity on the number of ICBM and nuclear warheads to restore strategic balance. According to the Center for Strategic e International Studies (2025, p.1) strategic balance "refers to the relative capabilities of the two sides to achieve their respective strategic objectives in relation to the other."

The agreement represented a major step in the diplomatic dialogue, aiming "to replace the Interim Agreement with a long-term comprehensive Treaty providing broad limits on strategic offensive arms" (U.S. Department of State, 1979, p.1). SALT II (1979, p.11) established a limit of "1,320 on the total number of launchers of MIRVed ballistic missiles and heavy bombers with long-range cruise missiles"; a limit of "1,200 on the total number of launchers of MIRVed ballistic missiles"; a limit of "820 on launchers of MIRVed ICBMs"; and 2,400 warheads for each side, distributed across all categories of strategic delivery systems (includes ICBM, SLBM, and heavy bombers).

The agreement reaffirmed the post-war *status quo*, maintaining the division of Europe into U.S. and Soviet Union spheres of influence, while underlining the inviolability of established spheres of influence and the existing geopolitical balance (Monteiro, 2008). This would discourage a direct cronfrotation or interference across ideological lines. However, with the election of U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1980, a clear shift in direction emerged. Reagan's foreign policy was marked by the Roll Back Doctrine (Davidson, 1986). This doctrine aimed to reassert the U.S. presence in all

strategic conflicts in order to expand American influence and push back against the spred of Soviet power. As a result, there was a renewed escalation of East-West relations tensions, accompanied by strategic planning to restart an arms race. Moreover, President Reagan (1987) "declared that the Soviet Union had violated its political commitment to observe SALT II Treaty". Therefore, the treaty was not renewed in 1985 due to the lack of non-compliance of Soviet. This doctrine ultimately prevailed to the extent that Reagan's predominant strategic interests began to shape American engagement in international scenarios such as the U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988 (Department of State, 2001).

Despite the failure of the SALT agreements, the 1990s would witness a renewed commitment to arms control. Plus, the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War in the early 90s reshaped not only the structure of the international system and the balance of power, but also the field of arms control itself. According to Portela (2020, p.17) it "saw the conclusion of new disarmament treaties, and a considerable reduction of nuclear arsenals." Therefore, bilateral talks between the U.S. and Russia, to reduce nuclear arms, gained momentum, initiating a series of new treaties. Negotiations for START I (1991), START II (1993), Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT – 2002), and later the New START (2010) marked a significant reduction in the number of strategic nuclear weapons held by the two historically rival nations (Pieper, 2020). In light of this historical development, the New START has become the focal point of this dissertation. Not only does it represent the last bilateral arms control treaty concluded between the two states, but it also represents the legacy of decades of nuclear competition and the fragility of contemporary arms control, given its current suspension.

II. Theoretical-Conceptual Framework

Neoclassical Realism and Deterrence Theory

The beginning of the twenty-first century marked a period of significant changes in global governance, particularly regarding the framework established after the end of the Cold War in 1987 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. With the U.S. assuming isolated leadership on the international stage, a new unipolar order emerged. In this context, the international system has

entered a transitional period characterized by substantial transformations in global power dynamics and the security environment of states (Gallagher, 2016).

This transition has introduced increasing instability and unpredictability, necessitating careful monitoring of scenarios in which national interests may be at risk and ongoing evaluation of the mechanisms required to safeguard them (Clackson, 2011). Changes in the international system occur through the rise and fall of great powers, often accompanied by the outbreak of conflicts. This perspective is established by theorist Kenneth Waltz, a prominent figure in neorealism. Waltz (1979) argues that a bipolar system offers greater guarantees for international security. For instance, during the Cold War, U.S. and Soviet Union nuclear parity exemplifies Waltz's claim that balanced capabilities reduce incentives for direct conflict.

"According to neo-realist theory, a basic feature of international relations is the decentralized structure of anarchy between states" (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013, p.79). For neorealists, despite the inherently self-interested nature of states, their behavior is not solely determined by the desire to accumulate power. Rather, they operate within a structured system. Waltz (1979) contends that the structure of the international system differs from that of domestic systems based on three key criteria: the ordering principle of the system, the character of its constituent units, and the distribution of their capabilities.

Moreover, neoclassical realism extends beyond structural realism by asserting that states do not respond automatically to external pressures. Instead, their foreign policies are shaped by national priorities. In fact, the realist and neorealist models differ in their understanding of the notion of national interest: realists define states as organizations led by individual leaders whose success in foreign policy depends on the prudence of their decisions, whereas Waltz views states as units that respond to the imperfections and constraints imposed by the international system (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013).

Historically, after the devastation of World War I (WWI), the liberal internationalist vision promoted the concept of collective security, particularly through the League of Nations. According to Morgenthau (1948) "collective security is the institutionalization of the balance of power principle through an international organization that seeks to prevent war by deterring potential aggressors". In this sense, President Wilson articulated his global vision of democracy through a framework aimed at preventing Europe from descending into war, which he viewed as a guarantor of collective

security (Fernandes and Simão, 2019). This division was rested on the premise that an international body, like the League of Nations, would regulate peace. Democracy (ideal system of governance) and freedom of trade (foundation for institutions that promote collective associations) were upheld as principles for international cooperation (Mendes, 2019). In practice, however, the collective security envisioned ultimately failed to prevent future conflicts, as it struggled to foster effective cooperation among sovereign states (Mendes, 2019; Bloor, 2022). The League's failure to prevent WWII revealed the limitations of relying on collective mechanisms for ensuring peace and stability. This historical failure reinforced realist interpretations of international relations, emphasizing the pursuit of national interests and power as the true foundations of international security. It also set the stage for the re-emergence and strengthening of realist approaches, particularly those centered on deterrence and balance of power (Knopf, 2010).

Neoclassical realism challenges the collective security view by arguing that power remains the central currency of international politics, and that institutions reflect the interests and capabilities of dominant states (Knopf, 2010). According to realists, deterrence theory emerged as a more effective alternative to security, particularly during periods of geopolitical tension and systemic uncertainty (Waltz, 1979). In times of uncertainty of international order, states committed to maintaining the *status quo* often adopt assertive strategies, redefining their approaches to ensure a favorable position (Mendes, 2019). This stance shapes the emerging order in alignment with their national interests, determining the potential of each state.

From the perspective of neoclassical realism, states behavior is shaped not only by the international distribution of power but also by domestic factors (Waltz, 1979). In this matter, military deterrence becomes a central strategy. Military capabilities are an essential component of national power, as they enable deterrence against the use of force by other states and provide the means for coercion (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Deterrence theory, is defined as a "credible military capability, both in the conventional and in the nuclear arms field, with the clear political will to act in order to convince any potential aggressor that the consequences of coercion or armed conflict would outweigh the potential gains" (Nato/Russia Document, 2007, p.17)

This strategy stabilizes the region under its influence, preserves its advantages, and deters competition from other states (Portela, 2020). Stability, in this context, is defined as deterring challenges to the *status quo* through military measures, which reduces animosities and fosters the rediscovery of shared interests (Gallagher, 2016).

Anticipating trends or redirecting them into advantages involves identifying tactical opportunities that improve the State's positioning relative to others. These strategic factors enable a state to consolidate its position while accumulating power to achieve and secure their objectives. On the international stage, States rely on their leader's ability to persuade others of the wisdom of their policies. In this context, arms reduction becomes an example of a stabilizing factor (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013). According to Kissinger (1994), NAC is peacefully managed through dialogue that identifies mutual interests as stabilizing elements, despite persistent antagonism (detente). Such diplomatic commitments have become central to common strategies, seeking to expand areas of agreement and bilateral cooperation while overcoming competitive elements (Rogers, Korda, and Kristensen, 2022).

As states seek strategies to safeguard their national interests while maintaining territorial stability, deterrence remains a central element of military power projection. According to Arbatov (2019, p.3), "the philosophy of nuclear deterrence was born out of the symbiosis of the principle of military deterrence and the emergence of nuclear weapons." For example, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, demonstraded nuclear deterrence in practice. Both superpowers avoided escalation due to credible threats of nuclear retaliation. While conventional military capabilities may be effective in deterring aggression, the unprecedented destructive potential of nuclear weapons has elevated nuclear deterrence to a distinct and highly specialized domain of strategic thought (Arbatov, 2019). The doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) institutionalized the principle that both sides arsenals must remain survivable to deter first strikes, shaping U.S. and Soviet Union strategies during the Cold War. Moreover, nuclear deterrence requires a conceptual framework that integrates both structural constraints and domestic-level factors (Knopf, 2010).

At its core, strategy is the art of gaining and maintaining the initiative, combining foresight and determination with the ability to identify and exploit opportunities to achieve predefined objectives through skillful maneuvers. Strategy, as applied through tactics, aims to protect national interests under specific circumstances, linking military planning with broader diplomatic goals (Arbatov, 2019). In this sense, military and diplomatic strategies are interwoven, bringing together all elements of national power in calculated policies designed to advance or defend state interests in response to evolving international conditions. Diplomatic strategy supports military strategy by managing relationships with allies, disrupting adversarial coalitions, and transforming military victories into lasting national security and geopolitical influence. Therefore, neoclassical realism

provides this framework when applied to this case study involving deterrence strategies, great power rivalry, and the reconfiguration of arms control regimes.

III. State of Art and Scientific Contribution

Nuclear Arms Control

According to Hart (1976), the definition of power is measured by a state's ability to influence or direct the behavior of others, based on its capacity to project force via military capabilities. This conception of power provided and continues to provide the means by which a state exercises power over others (Hart, 1976). These are measured by combat effectiveness, grounded in coercion, intimidation, destruction, and loss of life. Such means were historically employed to compel enemies to unconditionally surrender to the victorious state's will. This perspective is supported by Schelling and Halperin (1961, p. 312), who stated:

> "(...) the way to prevent war, or to gain political victories, or to prevent political retreats, was to have the capacity and the will to win a military victory. In other words, you deterred and influenced the adversary by threatening him with military defeat, and nothing less."

As noted, military power has long been central to a state's national power, however the transformations in international alignments and patterns of influence have challenged states. The globalization process has enabled an unprecedented global dynamic of political integration, fostering a framework of growing interdependence. Issues such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and radiation attest to the crisis of the state, as no single state can overcome these challenges alone (Keohane and Nye, 1977). As Keohane and Nye (1977, p.15) observed, "actors are mutually dependent and therefore have a rational interest in maintaining (...) peaceful cooperation." Globalization has also led to the diffusion of threats and risks, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, increasing their complexity (Pieper, 2020). This necessitates greater coordination among states. Globalization has also been profoundly altered by new and unexpected constraints in the realm of NAC. Changes in the international system, marked by arms control, have required a rethinking of external relations and a reassessment of power balances (Acton, 2018).

Nuclear weapons are categorized into strategic and non-strategic weapons (tactical). According to Rovere and Roberston (2013, p.2) “strategic nuclear weapons are primarily used for deterrence by threatening a would-be adversary with massive destruction (...).” On the other hand “non-strategic nuclear weapons “are primarily designed for attacks against military targets” (Rovere and Roberston (2013, p.2). Strategic Nuclear Weapons are included in New START as instruments of deterrence. These comprise ICBMs, SLBMs, and long-range bombers, which are systems capable of reaching targets at intercontinental distances, reinforcing their role as a central element in maintaining strategic balance among nuclear powers.

Since the mid-20th century, nuclear affairs have posed a persistent threat in international relations. Crises related to NAC have significantly increased, challenging international security and strengthening the pursuit of nuclear non-proliferation policies. Therefore, arms control policies emerged as mechanisms not only to reduce weaponry developments but also to maintain equilibrium in a shifting global order. For example, tensions surrounding Iran’s Nuclear Program impacted the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement, leading to the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 (Gallagher, 2016). The agreement not only clashed with the U.S.’s protectionist and isolationist stance but also failed to serve its foreign policy interests. This crisis illusrates how nuclear diplomacy intersects with national interests.

This constant tension generates significant instability, highlighting the fragile balance between deterrence and cooperation. Regarding this, Adam Rotfeld (2021, p.4) argues:

> “(...) arms control involves strong elements of mutual interest in the avoidance of a war that neither side wants, in minimizing the costs and risks of the arms competition, and in curtailing the scope and violence of war in the event it occurs.”

This view underscores the need to control nuclear escalation. Wan (2021, p.1) defines escalation as “an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants.” Therefore, it is essential that parties commit to acting jointly or in parallel to develop or protect specific common interests, ensuring the limitation of strategic weapons.

As Perrin (2021) notes, nuclear containment aims to restrict a state's ability to increase its power, thereby preventing changes to the *status quo* by frustrating its objectives. Therefore, the potential risks posed by existing nuclear arsenals cannot be ignored. For instance, the most significant erosion of this political framework has come from the rising geopolitical tensions that challenge nuclear and military paradigms (Portela, 2020). Efforts have focused on restricting measures that exacerbate U.S.-Russia antagonism to establish stability and predictability in their relations, avoiding escalation and its implications for security and defense.

Nonetheless, nuclear security dynamics, characterized by a unique nature, have shaped the course of history. Hood and Cromier (2024) highlight that the international order, particularly nuclear security, consists of norms and practices that govern state behavior as well as international legal and regulatory regimes. Therefore, deterrence requires constant efforts to convince adversaries to adjust their relations (Rotfeld, 2021). It demands continuous strategic foresight, such as military readiness. The fragility of states and their need to defend against external threats reinforce a defensive posture aimed at ensuring survival. As a result, greater emphasis has been placed on defense policy and the preservation of sovereignty, reflecting the logic of self-preservation in an anarchic international system. States thus seek to maintain an assertive status quo, redefining their defensive strategies as instruments to safeguard national power and deter adversaries (Rotfeld, 2021). By doing so, they aim to secure advantageous positions in the international arena, ensuring that their power and their interests are preserved and defended.

Political and Security Environment

Within this new strategic context, U.S. President George W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev played central roles, in the signing on the first of four Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties on July 31, 1991, in Moscow. The evolution of these agreements, paticularly in terms of verification and limits, is outlined in the table bellow (page 12).

	START (1991)	SORT (2002)	New START (2010)
Delivery Vehicle limits	.1,600 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles	-	.800 deployed and non-deployed launchers (ICBMs, SLBMs, nuclear-equipped heavy bombers); within that, no more than 700 deployed
Warhead limits	.6,000 attributed to ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers .4,900 attributed to ICBMs and SLBMs .1,100 attributed to mobile ICBMs .1,540 attributed to heavy ICBMs (Additional 3,600 metric tons throw weight limit)	.1,700-2,200 deployed strategic warheads	.1,550 deployed warheads (on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs, and one warhead for each deployed heavy bomber)
Verification	Detailed and complex verification regime; Detailed definitions of the limited items; Database identifying the numbers, types, and locations of the limited items; NTM use provisions; Notifications; On-site inspections;	-	Comprehensive but streamlined verification regime; Detailed definitions of the limited items; Database identifying the numbers, types, and locations of the limited items; NTM use provisions; Notifications; On-site inspections;

Table 1. A comparison of bilateral strategic arms control treaties, 1972-2010

Source: Jessica Rogers, Matt Korda e Hans M. Kristensen (2022, pp.350)

START I represented a critical step toward re-establishing the balance of power between the two powers. It became a fundamental instrument in managing bilateral relations, as both sides pursued strategic stability through the reduction, rather than limitation, of nuclear arsenals. According to Payne (2021, p.24) strategic stability is defined as a "mutual societal vulnerability to nuclear retaliation (that) would ensure and overpowering disincentive to either's nuclear provocation."

This dynamic sought not only to reduce strategic tensions but also to solidify a framework of long-term cooperation in the post-Cold War international order. Nevertheless, underlying these efforts was a persistent desire to strengthen military programs as a means of expanding power

In December 1991, the dissolution of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its subsequent fragmentation into fifteen independent republics emerged a new dynamic for arms control. Only four independent republics retained possession of nuclear weapons (see Annex 2., page 88): Russian Federation, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan (Reif, 2020). This historic event delayed the entry into force of the START I but did not ultimately prevent its implementation. These shifts in the balance of power had a significant impact on the broader nuclear policy landscape. In response to this geopolitical transformation, the U.S. and the four aforementioned nuclear-armed successor states signed the Lisbon Protocol (1992) thereby establishing a framework of shared strategic interests. The protocol stipulated that the Russian Federation would assume responsibility of the strategic nuclear arms and "that Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan shall adhere to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as non-nuclear weapon states" (Lisbon Protocol, 1992, p. 2).

START I thus initiated a broader process of transformation in global nuclear governance, characterized by the development and diffusion of new arms control mechanisms. With a duration of seven years following its entry into force in December 1994, START I (1991, p.1), under Article III, sections a and b (i, ii, and iii), outlined the following provisions: "1,600, for deployed ICBMs and their associated launchers, deployed SLBMs and their associated launchers, and deployed heavy bombers, including 154 for deployed heavy ICBMs and their associated launchers; 6,000, for warheads attributed to deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers, including: 4,900, for warheads attributed to deployed ICBMs and deployed SLBMs; 1,100, for

warheads attributed to deployed ICBMs on mobile launchers of ICBMs; 1,540, for warheads attributed to deployed heavy ICBMs".

Therefore, it was observed that "on-site inspections were central ... to confirm the data declared through the exchanges and notifications" (Vaddi, 2019, p.3). Nonetheless, the exchange of information was essential for identifying the extent of U.S. and Russian commitments to maintaining the balance of power and their shared purpose in reducing nuclear armaments. Yet, the negotiation process brought to light a set of issues stemming from the complex political environment between the U.S. and Russia. Iragorri (2003) defines international negotiation as a specific set of themes that reshape the relationship between states, seeking to build a broader foundation for cooperation.

Although START I remained in effect until 2009, this did not preclude the establishment of a new agreement, START II, which built upon its predecessor. START II retained many of the provisions set forth by START I but introduced additional obligations, notably the reduction and eventual elimination of "MIRV carrying ICBMs and heavy ICBM launchers, and requirement to eliminate all heavy ICBMs" (Russell, 2021, p.4). A critical quantitative benchmark of START II was the agreed limit of 3,000 to 3,500 deployed strategic warheads attributed to each side (Russell, 2021). These limits represented the strategic ceiling for operationally deployed warheads, underlining a mutual recognition of the need to maintain strategic parity while avoiding excessive stockpiling. Moreover, START II reflected a qualitative evolution in arms control regimes, shifting the focus from mere reductions to the elimination of specific weapons systems, reinforcing mutual deterrence.

The treaty was signed on Januray 3, 1993 by U.S. President Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin, underscoring once again the imperative of bilateral cooperation and nuclear deterrence. However, the ratification process encountered significant delays, which ultimately prevented the treaty from entering into force. While the U.S. Senate ratified the agreement in 1996, the Russian side approached the process with considerable caution (Department of State, 2009). The State Duma of the Russian Federation raised serious concerns, particularly economic ones, regarding the costs and logistics of dismantling nuclear arsenals. More prominently, however, Russia's principal apprehension stemmed from the eastward expansion of NATO, which it perceived as a direct threat to its national security interests. Given that final ratification approval by

the State Duma, the process became prolonged and politically complex. Russia's ratification only ocurred in 2000, seven years after START II initial signing (Department of State, 2009). By that time, the post-Cold War international landscape had shifted significantly. The emerging security paradigm of the early 21st century was no longer dominated by solely state actors. Instead, transnational threats and non-state actors began to assume a more prominent role in shaping global defense and security agendas.

Despite this development, nuclear deterrence, and the reconstruction of the bilateral relationship standing out as key concerns within the international system, the U.S., under the Bush administration, conversely focused on plans for its foreign policy. One of its primary objectives was "to avoid the topic of arms control as far as possible" (Tung, 2011, pp. 10). In this context, 2002 saw the U.S. withdrawal from ABM. This decision significantly altered the political climate with Russia, as evidenced by growing Russian distrust. Moscow perceived the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM as a direct threat to its nuclear deterrence capability, hindering efforts to restore Russian influence and preventing the establishment of a new strategic balance.

Both the U.S. and Russia have long wielded considerable power within the international system, as demonstraded by their enduring influence in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and their significant military capabilities, including naval forces and nuclear arsenals (Gallagher, 2016). Nevertheless, Moscow's view of U.S. foreign policy was marked by a perception of Washington's true objectives, underpinned by a desire to strengthen unilateralism (Gallagher, 2016). This inbalance in strategic perceptions, coupled with a deepening atmosphere of mistrust, led Russia to formally withdraw from START II. This decision was taken in direct response to the U.S. unilateral withdraw from the ABM, which Russia viewed as a fundamental pillar of strategic stability. As a result, despite having been signed in 1993 and reflecting a step toward NAC, START II exemplified the fragility of arms control frameworks.

During Putin's administration, two issues appeared to shape the relationship with the U.S., on one hand, the attempt to establish a strategic nuclear agreement, rejected by President Bush, and on the other, the increasing expansion of NATO into the post-Soviet space (Fernandes, 2013). Putin viewed the U.S. position with distrust, particularly perceiving it as a threat to Russian strategic interests. For Putin, it was urgent to expand Russia's sphere of influence globally, which had diminished following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, creating a power vacuum (Fernandes, 2013).

The period following the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty witnessed a deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations, marked by significant discontent regarding the contours of the American decision, exacerbating mistrust. The political environment became characterized by a clear division of national and international interests. Hence, Bush quickly devised a strategy to bolster the U.S. position on the global stage (Gallagher, 2016). The years between 2002 and 2008 clarified the intentions of both the U.S. and Russia, primarily focusing on the necessity of safeguarding each country's national interests.

Amid these currents shiftings, it became imperative to develop alternative frameworks for strategic cooperation, especially in light of emerging transnational security threats (international terrorism), which had demonstraded its destabilizing potential following the attacks of 09/11 (Kimball, 2022). These developments accentuated the urgent need to reconceptualize the international security and defense governance, on adaptability and rapid threat response. A particular concern was the potential proliferation of nuclear materials to non-state actors, thereby introducing an unprecedented level of assymetry into the global security (Gallagher, 2016; Kimball, 2022). As a result of these circumstances and emerging structural trends, the need for new forms of political and military organization became paramount.

Against this backdrop, SORT, not only emerged as a pragmatic response to the failure of START II but also reflected an approach to arms control consistent with the post 09/11 security paradigm. However, "unlike past strategic arms control agreements between Moscow and Washington, SORT did not specify which warheads had to be reduced or how reductions were to be made" (Kimball, 2022, p.1). This lack of specificity immediately set SORT apart, revealing fundamental differences in how the U.S. and Russia conceptualized and approached arms control. Through a series of official statements, Bush (2002a) made it clear that the "United States will reduce (...) operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to a level between 1,700 and 2,200 over the next decade, a level fully consistent with American security."

As previously mentioned, Bush adopted a distinct stance toward nuclear weapons. His administration sought to minimize the political visibility placed on nuclear arms in American foreign policy discourse. In essence, the less nuclear weapons were discussed, the better, a posture that aligned with his preference for flexibility over arms control frameworks. Putin (2002a) on the other hand mentioned "Russia is stating its readiness to proceed with significant reductions of strategic offensive arms."

The establishment of bilateral strategic cooperation between the two powers through SORT revealed several distinctive features of the treay. The treaty lacked any verification mechanisms and compliance provisions, which marked significant difference from previous arms control agreements (Kimball, 2022). As such, the implementation of SORT relied entirely on the mutual understanding and political will of both parties. Although START I remained in force at the time and continued to provide a functioning verification framework, SORT did not introduce any new verification instruments. Its only commitment was the mutual reduction of operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads by the year 2012.

At the Bucharest Summit on April 3, 2008, NATO expressed in the 23rd point of its declaration the aspiration for "Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO," noting that "both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations" (NATO, 2008). Within the sphere of sovereignty, the necessity to strengthen ties was emphasized, reinforcing cooperation between NATO member states and aspiring nations.

In parallel with Bush's strategies, then-President Medvedev and his Prime Minister, Putin, developed an assertive approach aimed at guaranteeing the national sovereignty of their territory (Tung, 2011). This stance remained consistent in subsequent years (Georgia – 2008, Crimea – 2014, Ukraine – 2022). The security issue, which had been a constant concern, was intrinsically linked to this process.

On August 7, 2008, Russia's invasion of Georgia triggered international discontent, threatening the international order and U.S. interests (Fernandes, 2013). This invasive process unfolded in two phases: the first, aimed at direct military intervention against Georgian forces in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the second, focused on establishing limits and clarifying NATO's border dynamics in the region, one of the most fragile aspects of the situation. In this regard, Fernandes (2013, p. 87) emphasizes that "this zone of vital interest (...) is fundamental in the Russian perception of threats."

Thus, Russia's presence in Georgia was also characterized by efforts to obstruct the country's integration into NATO, underscoring its singular geopolitical stance. In this context, Moscow's preference for adopting an imperial posture toward the growing number of NATO member states became evident (Fernandes, 2013), reflecting its intention to influence the assessment of these nations entry into the alliance. Internally, the issue of NATO's expansion

remained a constant focus, making the trajectory of Moscow's relationship with the West increasingly irreversible.

The Case of the New START: From Cooperation to the Deterioration of U.S.-Russia Relations

Considering bilateral cooperation in the context of NAC, agreements have been pivotal as they "helped manage uncertainties and dampen pressures" (Woolf, 2021, pp.314). Regarding the initiation of negotiations for the New START, it is essential to assess whether the adoption of the treaty was significant in fostering a rapprochement between the U.S. and Russia, given the extensive history outlined in the preceding topics. This process was primarily driven by Presidents Obama and Medvedev, who viewed its implementation as a means to fulfill nuclear security commitments (Kristensen, Korda, and Reynolds, 2023), as outlined in Table 1.

Following his election, Obama emphasized that the benefits of the START treaty should not be overlooked, particularly as issues related to security and defense assumed prominence (Tung, 2011). Consequently, the initial phase of Obama's administration focused on efforts to renegotiate the START treaty with Moscow. On March 6, 2009, this effort yielded rapid progress, including the establishment of a framework for future negotiations. These anticipated negotiations quickly materialized, as both parties "showed the willingness to seek to reach an agreement that would replace START" (Tung, 2011, p.15). Washington and Moscow clarified that this initiative represented a cooperative process in which both sides committed to forging a deeper, more intrinsic partnership. Obama and Medvedev articulated their respective proposals for changes, aiming to ensure greater flexibility and mutual understanding between the parties (Tung, 2011). In light of this prospect, both sides became open to explore mutually satisfactory solutions that would also adress their respective strategic interests and security concerns.

In adressing critical areas of concern for both parties, the treaty focused on three strategic pillars: monitoring and verification, strategic balance, and security assurances. This short-term process aimed at implementing measures (mentioned on p.36 and 37) "would contain definitions, data exchanges, notifications, eliminations, inspections and verification procedures, as well as confidence-building and transparency measures" (Tung, 2011, p.17). These measures sought, on the one hand, to reconcile differences between the parties, and on the other, to achieve meaningful progress in NAC.

The drafting of the New START on April 8, 2010, marked a significant milestone, serving as a foundation "to assert compliance with Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and help to preserve the international non-proliferation regime" (Brooks, 2020, p.90). The adoption of the treaty reflected not only a new adaptation to the international landscape but also the necessity of redefining priorities. It became imperative to revisit the concept of strategic stability as a fundamental tool for shaping the U.S. and Russian responses to the challenges of the nuclear security environment.

In this regard, U.S. President Obama (2010a) emphasized in his Prague speech on April 8:

> "Finally, this day demonstrates the determination of the United States and Russia - the two nations that hold over 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons - to pursue responsible global leadership. Together, we are keeping our commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which must be the foundation for global non-proliferation."

The New START, which entered into force on February 5, 2011, ensured transparency, predictability, and limits on nuclear forces in the intersection of U.S. and Russian foreign policies through bilateral monitoring (Russell, 2021). This treaty stands as the sole bilateral agreement aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation via the reduction of nuclear arsenals (Klotz, 2020). While it does not impose a hierarchy of obligations, it acts as a strategic starting point for rebalancing geopolitical dynamics and nuclear security measures. In essence, it identifies the mechanisms the New START employs to address nuclear disputes.

Loftus (2021) describes strategic interests as objectives arising from events that do not constitute an immediate threat to international security but, if ignored, could directly threaten vital interests or the ability to defend them. In this context, Medvedev (2010a) highlighted that compliance and adherence by both parties would yield mutual benefits, stating:

> "What matters most is that this is a win-win situation. No one stands to lose from this agreement. I believe that this is a typical feature of our cooperation - both parties have won. And taking into account this victory of ours, the entire world community has won."

The New START establishes in Article 2, n°1, clauses (a), (b), and (c), the terms under which its resolution proceeds, specifying that after a seven year period (February 5, 2018 – see Annex 3., page 89), both parties under the agreement must adhere to the following nuclear limits:

(a) 700, for deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers;

(b) 1,550, for warheads on deployed ICBMs, warheads on deployed SLBMs, and nuclear warheads counted for deployed heavy bombers;

(c) 800, for deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, deployed and non-deployed SLBM launchers, and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers;

However, a central issue with the New START lies in the notion of arms control itself, as several questions arise within the treaty's framework (Hood and Cromier, 2024). The primary concern is that any definition formulated tends to focus exclusively on the consequences of its violation or, at most, on its normative structure, but provides limited insight into its content. This raises challenges for interpreting and practically applying the treaty in bilateral relations (Woolf, 2021). Throughout the New START negotiations and ratifications process, in the second semester of 2010, a number of contentius issues surfaced. They reflected both domestic political divisions within the U.S. and long standing strategic concerns on the part of Russia. One of the most debated topics was the question of missile defense, a program that, while not part of the treaty's legally binding provisions, held significant political and strategic weight during negotiations (Congressional Research Service, 2022). The U.S. has steadily advanced the modernization of its strategic forces, including its missile defense capabilities. However, missile defense systems, those designed for intercontinental threats, are extremely expensive. Missile Defense Agency Director O'Reilly stated that "the U.S. spends about 10 billion per year on missile defense" (Collina, 2010, p.1). As a result, members of the Democratic Party expressed concerns about the long term viability and cost effectiveness of such program. Nevertheless, over time, Democrats came to support missile defense initiatives, in light of growing concerns over potential threats for U.S. national interests.

For instance, during the Obama administration, the issue of missile defense became a point of partisan tension. Republicans criticized Obama for what they perceived as insufficient commitment to missile defense. These criticisms intensified during the New START ratification debate in the U.S. Senate in 2010. Although missile defense systems are not classified as nuclear weapons, Russia as long argued that they are intrinsically linked to strategic nuclear balance

(Congressional Research Service, 2022). Moscow expressed concern that unconstrained U.S. missile defenses could undermine the credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrent by neutralizing its second strike capability (Congressional Research Service, 2022). These concerns were among the points raised during the treaty's ratification process. In the U.S., the Constitution requires that the U.S. Senate provide its advice and consent to international treaties. While the ratification process does not give the U.S. Senate the power to alter the treaty text itself, it does allow for the inclusion of significant understandings on the New START. This separation of power means that the U.S. Senate can shape the treaty's implementation and interpretation.

In the case of New START, the treaty's preamble includes a non-binding reference to the interrelationship between strategic arms and missile defense systems. While this clause does not create legal obligations, Russia interpreted it as a recognition of the connection between the two. President Medvedev and Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov (2010), advocated for a more integrated framework that would link missile defense with strategic offensive arms (Congressional Research Service, 2022). As a response, U.S. negotiators under the Obama administration emphasized that missile defense would remain outside the scope of the treaty. This divergence became a flashpoint during ratification, as U.S. Senate Republicans insisted that the missile defense and strategic nuclear arms should be treated as separate issues, resisting any perceived limitation on U.S. technological advancement (Congressional Research Service, 2022).

From the Russian perspective, linking missile defense to the New START framework was strategically beneficial. Lacking the technological and financial means to develop missile defenses, Russia sought to include constraints on missile defense systems within arms control negotiations. However, the U.S. position was to exclude missile defense from formal treaty obligations in order to preserve its freedom of action in that domain. Another point of contention centered on tactical nuclear weapons (TNW). Russia possesses a significantly larger stockpile of these weapons, up to 2,000 operational tactical nuclear warheads, compared to the 500 for the U.S., mostly deployed in Europe under NATO arrangements (Norris and Kristensen, 2010). The U.S. has shown interest in expanding arms control agreements that include such weapons, arguing that any comprehensive nuclear disarmament framework must adress the assymetry, Moscow, however, has been resistant to such proposals, viewing its tactical arsenal as a necessary counterbalance to NATO's conventional superiority in Europe (Norris and Kristensen, 2010).

The ratification of the New START in December 2010 required careful negotiation not only between both nuclear powers, but also within the U.S. and Russia domestic political system. The U.S. Senate approved the treaty with a vote of 71 to 26 (Department of State, 2010) exceeding the necessary two-thirds majority. In Russia, both chambers of Federal Assembly followed the procedure in early 2011. The State Duma ratified New START with a vote of 350 to 96, and 1 abstention, and Federation Council also ratified, with a vote of 137 to 0 (Congressional Research Service, 2022). The ratification process reflected both strategic calculation to ensure continued arms control. As a result, both sides pursued negotiations based on their core security interests.

However, the erosion of U.S.-Russia relations worsened with successive NATO expansions (Fernandes, 2009), leading Putin to express strong dissatisfaction with security issues. In his Munich speech, the Russian president clearly rejected a unipolar world order. Previously, in 2008, the U.S. recognized Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, which Putin vehemently condemned, asserting it would dismantle the international relations system. Although international investigations attributed responsibility to both sides in this conflict, Putin's statements materialized with Russia's military invasion of Georgia, culminating in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and advancing revisionist plans (Fernandes, 2009).

In 2014, in Tallinn (Estonia), U.S. President Obama, in a NATO-related speech following Russia's invasion of Crimea, reaffirmed his commitment to defending and ensuring the security of Eastern allies, who feared potential Russian escalation. Should such escalation occur, Article 5th of the North Atlantic Treaty would be invoked, mandating immediate response from all NATO member states in the event of an invasion of another member state (Bloor, 2022).

In this transformative context, the current aggressive multipolarity characterized by the rise of new powers such as Russia (which seek to assert global influence) poses structural challenges to NATO and the European Union's cohesion (Bloor, 2022). For approximately seven decades, both organizations have strengthened their membership and institutions, driven by three favorable factors: U.S. security protection for (Western) Europe and the Mediterranean region; the construction and expansion of an international order based on liberal, multilateral, and regulated principles; and the ideological, cultural, and political cohesion of Western, liberal-democratic values contrasting with Eastern communist values (Marrone and Multi, 2020).

Although the inability to reach agreements led to unilateral maneuvers by both parties, on February 3, 2021, the American and Russian presidents, Biden and Putin respectively, agreed to extend the New START until 2026 (Woolf, 2021). While the nuclear issue was ostensibly "resolved," it was expected that both parties would adopt a moderate stance, which did not occur. Although the extension of the New START underscores a continued mutual effort on nuclear security matters, the international debate over strategic nuclear policy reached new levels of intensity, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 (Kristensen, Korda, and Reynolds, 2023).

With the escalation of the Russian invasion, the U.S. assumed an active role. While refraining from direct involvement in the conflict, the U.S. considered it its duty to arm the Ukrainian people to "police" and intervene in the domestic policies of Eastern European countries. As sanctions against Russia intensified, it became increasingly difficult for Russian inspectors to monitor nuclear armaments on U.S. soil. In retaliation to these NATO-imposed sanctions, Russia decided to suspend inspections entirely in the second quarter of 2022, culminating in its official withdrawal from the New START in February 2023 (Finnin, 2023).

In this regard, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2023) stated:

> "We intend to closely monitor subsequent actions by the United States and its allies in the area of strategic offensive arms and international security and strategic stability as a whole, as well as analyze them for possible damage to Russia's interests and the need for us to take additional countermeasures."

These intimidations have significant implications for the global order, particularly regarding nuclear proliferation, arms control, and the potential large-scale use of nuclear weapons. Additionally, the invasion of Ukraine, as stated in Putin's speeches, stems from an attempt to protect Crimea (annexed by Russia in 2014), with Putin asserting that Ukraine, in alliance with the West, planned to attack this territory (Finnin, 2023). Therefore, Russian positions have shifted according to their interests (Bidgood, 2023), reflecting the complexity of a global security environment where states remain interdependent.

Nevertheless, Russia's withdrawal from the treaty on February 21, 2023, must be understood within the broader context of historical developments discussed earlier, as well as in

light of more recent circumstances (Cimbala and Kord, 2022). Ultimately, the New START did not survive the proliferation of conflicts involving the U.S. and Russia. According to Gould-Davies (2023), Russia managed to compel the U.S. to view its withdrawal as a direct threat to American vital and security interests. However, it was also noted that Russia intensified its efforts in the realm of nuclear armament. Kristensen, Korda, and Reynolds (2023) shared this perspective, highlighting that Russia's increasing nuclear superiority undermines global security. This period is marked by uncertainty and an arms race between two historic rivals, as neither commits to disarmament or arms control programs stipulated by the New START (Russell, 2021).

Moreover, amid the current war in Ukraine, NATO's importance has resurged. U.S. foreign policy interests remain active and deeply rooted in NATO's principles. As the primary collective defense alliance, NATO continues to monitor developments in Ukraine. Russia's large-scale invasion, motivated by concerns over NATO expansion in Eastern Europe (Bidgood, 2023), underscores the growing geopolitical tensions characterizing the post-Cold War period. Putin's actions in Ukraine challenge the established liberal order, undermine regional stability, and question both territorial boundaries and the integrity of neighboring countries. Consequently, with its robust status, Russia has adopted a contestation role (Loftus, 2021), altering geopolitical dynamics and later the dynamics of the New START.

Given the increasing instability, the New START constitutes a pivotal instrument whose importance has grown over the decades due to efforts toward codification, addressing a need for certainty and security (Woolf, 2021). The agreement aims to establish connections between the U.S. and Russia to preserve international structures (Elbahtimy, 2023). Nevertheless, Dill and Schubiger (2021) argue that foreign policies driven by the impulse to propagate principles and ideals are more disruptive to international order and generate armed conflicts, as ideological conviction turns relations between nations into moral conflicts. Ultimately, the New START seeks to prioritize nuclear security by regulating negotiations and inspections on these issues without resorting to nuclear weapons (Pieper, 2020).

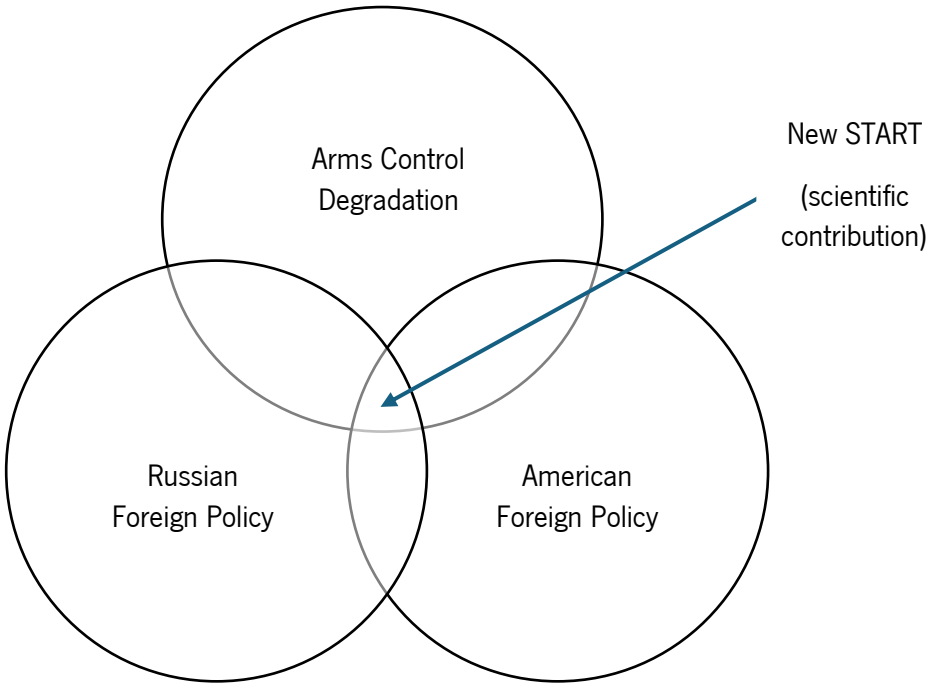
The scholarship on NAC is divided into two dominant approaches. The first, deterrence-centered, views arms control primarily as a mechanism to preserve stability by managing rivarly rather than eliminating nuclear weapons. Halperin's and Schelling's classic work emphasized arms control as a means of reducing uncertainty and strengthening second-strike capabilities, while Waltz's structural realism suggested that nuclear parity can prevent war by making cost

unacceptabily high. These perspectives show why New START placed such importance on symmetrical reductions, verifiable ceilings, and inspections. Yet, deterrence literature tends to treat states as a rational unitary actors and often overlooks how internal perceptions shape strategic choices, a limitation for understanding U.S. and Russia approaches to New START.

A second perspective, represented by Rotfeld, features the cooperative and normative dimensions of arms control. Rotfled highlights that arms control involves joint efforts to minimize the risks and costs of nuclear competition, and decrease escalation by fostering stability through verfication mechanisms. While this approach shows the organizational and cooperative aspects of U.S. and Russia agreements, it does not sufficiently explain the specific calculations that informed each side internally assessed its military power within the New START framework.

Together, these perspectives explain why NAC has been pursued, and why it remains contested. Understanding this underexplored thematic is crucial for explaining divergences in compliance, negotiation priorities, and the treaty's suspension. According to Figure 1 (Venn Diagram), the New START agreement is fundamentally important in the intersection of U.S. and Russian foreign policies regarding nuclear policy, particularly arms control.

Figure 1. Venn Diagram resulting from the state of art



Source: by the author

IV. Research Problem and Research Objectives

Throughout the research process, it became evident that nuclear affairs as long been the focus of scientific inquiry, further underlining its relevance in the IR field. Nevertheless, a significant gap in the literature was identified. According to the data presented by the authors of the respective literature review, there's a superficial analysis of the New START. While the treaty's provisions, verification mechanisms, and its role in bilateral cooperation are frequently mentioned, limited attention has been given to how the U.S. and Russia internally interpret their military power in light of the New START framework. Understanding these internal interpretations is essential to assess the stability and durability of this arms control agreement in practice.

In the 2010s, the New START incorporated provisions for nuclear arms reduction and control. However, it also inadvertently encouraged arsenal modernization, increasing the direct use of nuclear weapons. Consequently, the scale of potential destruction has taken new dimensions when compared to previous conflicts. Although the number of nuclear warheads has been reduced from START I to New START (Table 1, p.15), the explosive power of these warheads has significantly increased. This reflects not only advances in weapons systems but also the persistence of nuclear deterrence as a strategic priority. The enduring mistrust and geopolitical rivarly between the U.S. and Russia (rooted in Cold War era dynamics and reinforced by recent conflicts such as the Ukrainian war) have prevented a deeper transformation in nuclear strategy. As such, while the treaty achieved quantitative reductions, it did not substantially diminish the threat of nuclear conflict, since both parties have continued to rely on nuclear deterrence as a core element of their defense posture, making it more complex and harder to manage, thereby limiting the transformative potential of arms control.

In this context, reflecting on the role of the state in mobilizing and projecting military power, helps delineate a specific object of study. This process demonstrates how states transform military capabilities into instruments of influence. Furthermore, nuclear modernization, represented by new components at the level of military organization, directly influences the evolution of states strategic doctrines by altering the balance of power. Therefore, we argue that the projection of military power shapes a state's national potential, and the political and military impact of his power is mediated by the perceptions of potential adversaries. Thus, state security is a critical aspect of international relations. Investigating this gap and contributing to the discourse within the framework of

international relations is crucial not only from a military perspective of both states but also from a standpoint of domestic political decision-making.

As Halperin and Schelling (1961) argue, states are political entities that manifest through governments, which in turn exercise control over defined territories. In this sense, states are established to protect their interests and to fulfill the aspirations of the societies that constitute them. A powerful state may seek to exclude potential adversaries by developing political, economic, and military advantages or by asserting influence in regions of strategic interest. This behavior is particularly perceptible in the actions of great powers (specifically, in this case study, the U.S. and Russia), whose strategic doctrines reflect not only defensive imperatives but also broader geopolitical ambitions.

Considering the context and justification for this research, the following research question was defined:

How the U.S. and Russia perceive their military power projection under the framework of New START?

Fifteen years after the implementation of the New START and, institutionally, during its suspension, the global order and the roles of the U.S. and Russia have fundamentally changed. The complexities of the New START (Woolf, 2021) and its various analytical perspectives allow us to elucidate a strategic dimension of American and Russian foreign policies during this historical period, tracing its evolution from April 5, 2009 (the Prague Vision) to February 21, 2023 (Russia's suspension of the agreement). The temporal scope of this research aims to analyze the respective positions of the U.S. and Russia on arms control, particularly by comparing the aforementioned foreign policy discourses. The New START can be understood as an essential element in nuclear security and defense matters (Vaddi, 2019).

For the present dissertation, it was developed the following main objectives: 1) to examine the internal understanding of military power by the U.S. and Russia in the matter of New START; 2) to analyse how the New START contributed to both nuclear arms reduction and the modernization of arsenals; and 3) to trace the evolution of U.S. and Russian foreign policy discourse on arms control between 2010 and 2023.

This investigation will also focus on international nuclear security, examining an agreement that defined the new relationship (Tung, 2011) between the U.S. and Russia, aimed at reducing nuclear arms. This agreement resulted from a lengthy process marked by hesitation. The research seeks to explain the agreement and its importance in regulating nuclear arms, particularly its role as a strategic solution parameter in this specific case (arms control). Over just three decades, we have observed the evolution of these "partnerships" and identified the moment they entered into crisis.

V. Methodology and Data

Considering the methodology for this dissertation, the research adopts an epistemological interpretative approach to examine the bilateral Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between the U.S. and Russia. This epistemology is appropriate to this case study as it prioritizes understanding the meanings and motivations behind state behavior, in complex and political sensitive domains such as NAC. This premise significantly impacts the effectiveness of the New START Treaty by facilitating the mitigation of differences until both parties consider its extension advantageous.

As Sol and Heng (2022), explain "our knowledge of the world depends greatly on our interpretation or understanding of human actions, experiences, and environments." In this framework, the interpretation of international events relies on their contextual factors, specifically national interests and foreign policy strategies that shape the actions and decisions of international actors. Therefore, the New START is a political outcome shaped by strategic negotiation and interaction, and geopolitical dynamics.

Negotiations are interpreted and implemented through mutual consensus, focusing on the durability of the agreement and fostering a shared understanding of its procedures to serve the parties interests and objectives (Djoukeng, 2019). The aim of these negotiations is not merely to reach an agreement but to align the dyadic relationship with the respective national interests of the parties (Djoukeng, 2019). Such an understanding emerges from the empathy achieved through dialogue and the mutual comprehension of the detailed provisions. In this case study, the normative content of a specific provision (New START) derives from its interpretation and application. Consequently, this investigation adopts an empirical approach rather than relying solely on conviction or opinion.

According to Sol and Heng (2022) this paradigm seeks to replace the scientific notions of explanation, prediction, and control (characteristics of the positivist paradigm) with the notions of understanding, meaning, and action. Moreover, the interpretive approach seeks to engage with the subjective frameworks and context specific interpretations, in order to uncover how actors respond to specific situations, such as nuclear affairs.

From an ontological perspective, the research follows a realist position. The term ontological realism is associated with "the recognition that "at least a part of reality is ontologically independent of human minds" (Moreira, 2021, p.2). In this sense, the New START is viewed as a mechanism for strategic stability that is dependent on the political-historical context in which it is embedded, enabling the framing of the dissertation's subject matter. The use of a ontological realist perspective in this context does not imply a rejection of objective reality. Rather, it acknowledges that states responses to geopolitical shifts (balance of power, deterrence) are shaped by historical and political contingent factors (a core idea in neoclassical realism).

From a formal perspective, the only admissible sources of law under IL are those acts that implicitly or explicitly express the will of states. In this specific case study, we will address: Expressed Acts – Treaties = New START. This involves fostering cooperation between the relevant parties, seeking to balance their interests, and ensuring the integrity of the New START under the logic that the agreement operates as a unified whole (Dill and Schubiger, 2021). According to Hood and Cromier (2024), such an approach facilitates and enhances the prospects for strategic and cooperative arrangements between nations.

Therefore, this study employs a Case Study, specifically a Comparative Case Study (Small-N) (Seha and Müller-Rommel, 2016). This approach analyzes the actions and discourses classifications of the U.S. and Russia in the New START negotiations and implementation. The comparative arises from analyzing how both actors framed, extended, and perceived the treaty considering their strategic priorities. This element will allow identifying how different internal strategic perceptions shaped policies within the same international framework (Seha and Müller-Rommel, 2016). This dynamic is reflected in the extension of the treaty and its applicability. A case study is particularly suitable for this research because it enables in-depth exploration of a specific issue (New START), shaped by both structural and domestic level variables.

Therefore, the timeframe of this research spans from 2009, with the announcement of the Prague Vision by President Obama setting the stage for New START negotiations to 2023, when

Russia suspended its participation in the treaty amidst escalating geopolitical tensions. This period captures the entire cycle of New START, from its conception and operationalization to its deterioration, offering a comprehensive scope for empirical and theoretical analysis.

In the data collection process, this case study employs several techniques, characteristic of qualitative research, namely the analysis of discursive data, reports, and official government documents from the U.S. and Russia, which serve as a foundation for the in-depth examination and development of the research subject.

According to Aydin-Düzgit (2019, p.300) "discourse analyses in the field of international relations typically analyse official speeches, declarations, parliamentary debates, diplomatic documents, interviews, newspapers, and editorials as primary documents". These sources provide the empirical basis for assessing how both states articulated their national interests and expressed their positions on arms control. Moreover, in discourse analysis, both the context of analysis and the analytical framework determine how meaning is understood, in relation to policy analysis. This approach views discourse as reflecting political realities, acknowledging that these are often shaped by dominant and hegemonic powers.

VI. Structure of the Thesis

The present dissertation will be developed in three chapters to address the research question pertaining to our object of study. The first chapter will focus on a theoretical-conceptual framework, divided into two subchapters, with the goal of understanding the main principles of neoclassical realism.

The second chapter will focus on the security strategy adopted by the United States, particularly the conciliatory stance of President Obama's administration regarding NAC. This approach was exemplified by the publication of the original document titled Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in 2010, a process that was instrumental in the signing of the New START. This was later followed by the subsequent NPRs of 2018 and 2022. The chapter will provide an analytical framework based on policy and discourse analysis, which will structure the examination of this strategic nuclear document and related presidential speeches, noting that the New START spans three U.S. presidencies: Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. Each administration

demonstrated distinctive approaches to foreign policy, particularly in the realm of arms control. These advancements and setbacks in nuclear security significantly influenced cooperation in matters of defense and security.

The third chapter will analyze Russia's security strategy, particularly its revisions of the Military Doctrine corresponding to the year of 2014, and the Principles of Nuclear Deterrence of 2020. These revisions reflect a reinforcement of Russia's nuclear agenda, driven by President Medvedev and subsequently by President Putin. This agenda is intrinsically linked to the theory of deterrence, underscoring the role of nuclear weapons as a cornerstone of Russia's foreign policy strategy.

The study will conclude with the dissertation's research findings, examining bilateral interactions and their relevance and contribution to the field of International Relations (IR).

CHAPTER 1 – Theoretical Framework

IR as a discipline has long been shaped by conflicting paradigms that seek to explain the behavior of states, the nature of conflict, and the possibilities for cooperation in an anarchic international system (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Among the most influential are Realism and Liberalism, each offering divergent assumptions about nature and dynamics of international order. Both paradigms have profoundly influenced the analysis of IR particularly in the areas of power dynamics, alliances, and institutions. However, they offer distinct explanatory models for these elements and, more broadly, for the factors that lead states to pursue either cooperative or conflictual relations. In this regard, Fernandes and Simão (2019, p.19) note:

> "The liberal school assumes that institutions promote peace, while realists do not demonstrate the stabilizing effects of institutions in an anarchic environment."

This observation captures the essential divide between the two paradigms. While Realists emphasize the primacy of national interests, power, and the inevitability of conflict, Liberals maintain that mutual gains and global governance structures are not only desirable but feasible. Liberalism's emphasis on personal freedoms and global connections often clashes with nationalism's prioritization on protecting national identity (Mendes, 2019). Though nationalism remains a significant force in IR, it has led to a situation where virtually all states regard themselves as nations. These developments have hampered global cooperation efforts and contributed to the gradual.

Over time, both paradigms have evolved. Realism has developed a more nuanced approach, with neoclassical realism reflecting a sophisticated theoretical framework that incorporates both systemic and domestic variables to explain state behavior.

1.1 Realist Perspective: Conceptual Origins

The intellectual roots of Realism can be traced back to classical thinkers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli (in his separation of politics from morality to ensure the autonomy of the prince in state-

building – *Prince*), Hobbes (in his assertion of the moral neutrality of power – *Leviathan*), and Morgenthau, whose works consistently reflect enduring themes of power and self-interest.

Thucydides (5th century BC) account of the *Peloponnesian War* was one of the earliest expressions of Realist thought, portraying international politics as governed by necessity and the struggle for survival. This reflects the Realist belief in the centrality of power and the inevitability of conflict in an anarchic international system (Keohane and Nye, 1977). For Thucydides, small, medium, and large states must adjust their behavior in accordance with their available resources. His work emphasized recurring patterns in the relationships among entities in Ancient Greece specifically the system, the anarchy, and the security dilemma. International politics, from this perspective, is a contest aimed at maximizing state power, measured across political, economic, and military dimensions (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Within this framework, abstract moral principles are deemed inapplicable to political action. The increase in a state's power or even the perception or conviction of such an increase may lead to the outbreak of conflict. In response, the concept of the balance of power emerges as a mechanism to prevent war among states.

The international system is defined by the interactions among autonomous entities (states), which together form a system characterized by a continuous struggle for power (Gaspar, 2018). This system is marked by the absence of any authority above the state (anarchy) which means that the survival of each entity depends primarily on its relative power and internal capacity (Gaspar, 2018). Excessive growth in a state's power can trigger insecurity in others (security dilemma), thus making systemic stability closely linked to the balance of power.

Similarly, Niccolò Machiavelli (1532), in The Prince, articulated a vision of politics grounded in pragmatic calculation, deception, and the pursuit of national interest. He challenged idealistic visions of morality in statecraft, asserting that rulers must be prepared to act immorally when necessary to secure their state's survival and strength. Machiavelli's insights laid the philosophical groundwork for the Realist understanding of state behavior as shaped more by necessity than virtue.

In contemporary international relations, the interactions between states are predominantly driven by the pursuit of power. Edward Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939) structures and characterizes realism in IR by asserting the state as the primary actor, emphasizing power as a fundamental tool for state survival, and describing the international context as anarchic due to the

absence of global hegemony. Carr also minimizes the role of ethics, arguing that states may violate agreements or moral rules when their survival is at stake (Gaspar, 2018). Carr also downplays the role of ethics in international politics, contending that states may breach agreements or disregard moral norms when their survival is at risk. He revives a theory of power and defends the primacy of politics, explicitly rejecting the subordination of states to universal moral values (Kant's reflections). According to this perspective, political order cannot exist without power, and international order depends on the concentration of power in a hegemonic state possessing the necessary military, political, and economic strength to enforce its authority.

Hans Morgenthau (1948), expanded on this framework by defining politics as a struggle for power, aimed at ensuring national security. This perpetual contest results in a constant or imminent "state of war," where force supersedes norms (Gaspar, 2018). In this framework, increasing power inherently increases security. Realism asserts that states are the primary actors in global politics. It views human nature as inherently flawed and ambitious, which prevents harmony among nations and leads to conflict. Accordingly, international relations are characterized by the inevitability of conflict, with national security and state survival as overriding priorities. This perspective reaffirms the importance of status while emphasizing the inviolability of borders and discouraging the use of force in inter-state relations. It also acknowledges the necessity of fostering cooperation, enabling a gradual shift where cooperative elements outweigh competitive ones (Mendes, 2019). Common interests can then be pursued collectively without eliminating existing ideological differences.

Kissinger (2014), whose intellectual approach aligns with realism, underscores the importance of recognizing reality as it is and finding practical solutions adapted to prevailing circumstances. Realism implies a pragmatic approach to foreign policy that prioritizes dialogue and cooperation, often achieved through negotiation devoid of ideological constraints. It views politics as a process that often entails choosing the lesser evil, which enhances negotiation capabilities and consolidates decision-making processes. Cooperation, while rare in IR, does exist but requires significant effort and commitment. According to Pranay (2019), when states adopt a realist approach, cooperation is often sidelined, necessitating a minimum common denominator based on the interests at stake. These arguments provide room for rationality, coherence, and long-term perspectives.

Hobbes's assertion that "Homo Homini Lupus" encapsulates the pessimism about human nature in his thought, plays a central role in defining the "state of nature" (Gaspar, 2018). This state is characterized as a system governed by natural norms, where individuals possess the right to anything their power allows them to claim. The only limitation to one's actions is the superior power of another. Hobbes posits that natural law is the freedom each individual has to use their power as they see fit. Without laws to constrain actions (a rejection of positive law and organized political society), the state holds all sovereign power and acts purely in its self-interest.

1.1.1 Neoclassical Realism: Conceptual Origins

One of the key contributions to Realist theory was made by Kenneth Waltz, whose structural realism (or neorealism) reframed the understanding of international politics by focusing on the structure of the international system. Waltz (1979) argued that the absence of a central authority forces states to operate in an anarchic system of self-preservation, prioritizing survival often through power accumulation, deterrence, and strategic alliances. According to Waltz (1979, p.189), "dissuasion, whether by defense or by deterrence, is easier to accomplish (...)."

Neorealist theory focuses its analysis on the structure of the international system, the interactions among its units, and the patterns of continuity and change within that system. Therefore, neorealists maintain that the defining feature of international relations is the persistence of anarchy. The principal concern of state behavior is not necessarily the conquest of power, as classical realists suggest, but rather the pursuit of security and survival. States perform similar internal functions, namely, ensuring security and defending national interests. As Waltz (1979, p.144) notes, "states are distinguished primarily by their greater or lesser capabilities for performing similar tasks (...). The structure of a system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system's units." This systemic logic laid the foundation for neoclassical realism, which integrates Waltz's structural insights with internal dynamics such as state capacity and political institutions (Gaspar, 2018). It offers a more flexible and empirically grounded approach, particularly useful in analyzing complex strategic behavior such as nuclear deterrence and arms control. Neoclassical realism allows to examine the internal political speeches in Washington and Moscow shape perceptions of strategic advantage, influencing the negotiation of New START limits.

Within this structural perspective, defensive realism plays a critical role. Defensive realism asserts that states are primarily security seekers rather than power maximizers. It argues that aggressive behavior can provoke balancing coalitions, ultimately reducing security for the aggressor. According to Lobell (2010, p.2), "defensive realists maintain that the international system encourages states to pursue moderate and restrained behavior to ensure their survival and safety and provides incentives for expansion in only a few select instances." Furthermore, "they argue that anarchy compels states to maximize influence, to compete for power in a never-ending struggle for hegemony and engage in territorial expansion" (Lobell, 2010, p.9). Therefore, nuclear deterrence emerges as a central concept within realist theory, particularly in neoclassical realism, which views deterrence not only as a response to systemic constraints but also as a product of internal strategic calculations. In the context of New START, the U.S. and Russia do not only respond to each other's capabilities, but they also weigh military assessments.

However, according to neoclassical realism, these developments remain fundamentally driven by the anarchic nature of the international system (Gaspar, 2018). The central issue in international relations is the pervasive role of fear in shaping state behavior. The security dilemma refers to the paradox whereby a state's efforts to enhance its own security can be perceived by others as threatening, thereby increasing overall insecurity. In the domain of military modernization, such efforts may trigger reciprocal actions, exacerbate mistrust, and create a cycle of escalation. This argument is supported by Herz (1951) and Jervis (1976), who noted that "one state's attempt to increase its own security due to the anarchic nature of the international system can inadvertently threaten other states and make them less secure and thereby provoke them to augment their power" (Lobell, 2010, p.11). Unlike conventional armaments, nuclear weapons amplify the stakes of the security dilemma since even a small number of nuclear weapons can pose existential threats. Thus, a defensive posture may be perceived by rivals as an offensive preparation, heightening instability. New START can be seen as a tool to manage this dilemma. With verification mechanisms and transparency, both powers attempt to signal restraint and reduce fear of miscalculation.

In the absence of global authority, governance is confined to individual states, each acting to protect its own national interests (Keohane and Nye, 1977). The sensitivity of the security dilemma lies in a state's ability to recognize the fear its actions may generate in others. Fear, already central to the security dilemma, acquires another proportion in the nuclear era. Misinterpretation of intentions and technological developments may trigger escalation. When states fail to manage this perception, the result is often heightened insecurity, increased tensions, and a

breakdown in cooperation. The essential question then becomes: Who is afraid of whom? To reduce the risks of escalation and misunderstanding, proactive diplomatic efforts are necessary. In high-stakes areas such as nuclear arms, managing the security dilemma requires institutionalized agreements to build strategic trust. According to Hoffman (2002, p.377) "trusting relationships develop when actors grant others discretion over their interests based on the belief that those interests will not be harmed." Hence, New START illustrates the rational pursuit of strategic restraint to ensure national security in a growing nuclear environment. New START can therefore be understood as a response to nuclear security dilemma. By having transparency, verification, and limits, New START will relieve the spiral of mistrust inherent in nuclear competition.

Neoclassical realism highlights that treaties, such New START, effectiveness depend on how internal actors perceive threats and perceive the opponent's intentions. Understanding these dynamics helps explain why U.S. and Russian approaches to New START diverge.

CHAPTER 2 – The Evolution of U.S. Nuclear Strategy and Arms Control Policy (2010-2023)

2.1 The Obama Administration and the 2009-2017 Arms Control Policy

On April 6, 2010, the United States Department of Defense, under the Obama administration, released an official document entitled the *"Nuclear Posture Review"* (2010). This document outlined a series of strategic decisions and resolutions guided by a vision strongly focused on "the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security and its plans for nuclear weapons" (Moxley Jr., 2011, p.736). The 2010 NPR was structured around five core strategic pillars: "preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism; reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy; maintaining strategic deterrence and stability at reduced nuclear force levels; strengthening regional deterrence and reassuring U.S. allies and partners; and sustaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal" (Nuclear Posture Review Report, 2010, p.2).

This strategic view, published within the context of Obama's new approach to U.S. foreign policy and international security, was characterized by a conciliatory and multilateral approach of non-proliferation. Moreover, this policy posture was consistent with his earlier Prague Speech, where President Obama (2009a) declared the U.S. responsibility to lead on nuclear disarmament and the necessity of deterrence. In a formal statement released by the Office of the Press Secretary, President Obama (2010a, p.1) emphasized that "preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism is now at the top of America's nuclear agenda".

According to the statement (2010), President Obama identified a changing security environment marked by the intensification of political polarization, along with the rise of both state and non-state actors (including terrorist groups and transnational criminal organizations), and the potential acquisition of warheads have heightened threats to international security and complicated efforts toward global cooperation. The difficulty of coordinating a coherent international response is further compounded by the geopolitical complexities surrounding military interventions, even when linked to terrorist activities (e.g. the U.S. justified its intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 by invoking self-defense under IL following the 09/11 attacks, and later on 2011 the killing of Osama bin Laden was also justified by the U.S. as an act for self-defense against an armed attack) (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Within this framework, the Obama administration has sought to maintain strategic stability through active engagement in arms control and nuclear security (Moxley Jr., 2011). This includes participation in key strategic documents, treaties, and international forums that aim to reinforce multilateral dialogue. At the core of this approach lies the commitment to sustained diplomatic engagement on matters of shared strategic interest, a framework that seeks to expand areas of agreement and cooperation between states, even in the presence of irreconcilable differences on specific issues, such as nuclear affairs (Knopf, 2010).

International terrorism poses a significant challenge to the collective security system enshrined in the Charter of the UN (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2018), which was originally conceived to regulate conflicts within clearly defined territorial boundaries deemed in need of international oversight. With the ongoing crisis of the liberal international order in the 21st century there has been a marked reconfiguration of the patterns and dynamics of international conflict, with terrorism emerging as a central element in this transformation (Obama, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2019). The fear that terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, or later, the Islamic State (ISIS), might acquire fissile material through illicit channels, became a driving force behind U.S. non-proliferation policy (Obama, 2010).

In the contemporary context, terrorism is increasingly characterized by its diffuse and decentralized nature. This evident both in its methods, ranging from small-scale guerrilla tactics to the potential use of biological weapons, and in the diversity of its targets and actors, which often span across multiple states, making attribution and accountability more complex (Alcaro, 2018). This diffuse structure complicates efforts to establish clear lines of responsibility or trace the origins of specific attacks or methods.

Building upon the strategic framework established by the NPR (2010), the signing of the New START on April 8, 2010, between the U.S. and Russia represented a pivotal development in Obama administration's advancement of nuclear arms deterrence (Knopf, 2010). This cooperative stance adopted by the U.S. proved to be a cornerstone for the first Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), held in Washington D.C on April 12-13, 2010 (Malz-Ginzburg, 2011). The NSS brought together leaders from 47 countries (including major nuclear and non-nuclear states, such as India, Pakistan, Russia, North Korea, etc.) and three international organizations (EU, International Atomic Energy Agency - IAEA, and the UN). The summit (2010) reflected a promising outline of what would become the core elements of the Obama administration's nuclear agenda: prevention, diplomacy,

and cooperative threat reduction (Malz-Ginzburg, 2011). Through a commitment to multilateralism, Obama signaled its willingness to lead international efforts aimed at securing vulnerable nuclear materials and preventing nuclear terrorism (Futter, 2012).

This step was of critical importance, as it marked the beginning of a mutual commitment that brought renewed attention to President Obama's long-term objective of achieving 'a world without nuclear weapons' (Obama, 2010). Moreover, it contributed to the ongoing reinforcement of obligations outlined in Article VI of the NPT (1970, p.173) that states:

> "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

Obama did not hesitate to formulate a strategy that would enhance the U.S. position in the international arena (Knopf, 2010). However, these strategies were severely tested by a series of geopolitical crises, particularly the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014.

According to Waxman (2013) the conflict with Syria revealed the growing alignment between the Assad regime and Moscow, reinforcing Russia's long standing strategic interests in the region (interests that date back to the Cold War, when the USSR acted as the main supporter of the Syrian government). As the civil war deepened and rebel forces approached the southern frontiers near the Israeli border, President Peres (2013) perceived an increasing security threat and requested direct assistance from the U.S. In response, the U.S. established a logistical air bridge to supply Israel with military components (Obama, 2013a) to enable rapid and effective defense against the potential expansion of the conflict. Nevertheless, the Obama administration was cautious, aiming to avoid overt entanglement that might compromise its broader diplomatic objectives in the region or further escalate tensions with Russia (Unger, 2016).

As tensions deepened, U.S. defense planning had to account not only for conventional military threats but also the risk of fissile material falling into the hands of non-state actors or being used as leverage in proxy conflicts (Addicott, 2014). This escalation added urgency to U.S. non-proliferation efforts.

The 2014 invasion of Crimea by the Russian Federation marked a significant rupture in the post-Cold War diplomatic order, and a shift on the balance of power (Unger, 2016; Latici, 2018; Fernandes and Cruz, 2022). It challenged the foundational principle that national borders in Europe could not be altered by force but only through mutual agreement, particularly under the oversight or tacit approval of major powers. Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, particularly "through disinformation and propaganda campaigns" (Fernandes and Cruz, 2022, p.9) operated largely outside the traditional scope of strategic deterrence and treaty regimes. This forced Obama's administration to revise its security posture toward Europe, including a renewed emphasis on NATO's eastern flank and enhanced rotational deployments through the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) (Latici, 2018).

Despite ongoing geopolitical tensions, the New START remained in force. Not only did it endure but also facilitated continued cooperation and strategic engagement at a time when other diplomatic mechanisms failed. One such example is the NATO-Russia Council (NRC), established in 2002 as a forum for consultation and joint decision-making on security issues (NATO, 2022). However, following the events in Crimea, and later Ukraine, NATO suspended all practical cooperation with Russia, effectively paralyzing the NRC (NATO, 2022). In contrast, the New START not only remained intact but actively continued to underscore its resilience and strategic indispensability. For instance, even amid heightened political hostilities, the New START enabled regular data exchanges, specifically mutual notifications regarding nuclear arsenals, and on-site inspections up until early 2020 (see Table 2). This ensured a minimum level of transparency and communication between Washington and Moscow, preventing further deterioration.

Despite the treaty's caps being based on a rigorous analysis conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense planners in support of the 2010 NPR, several limitations became evident. The growing strategic mistrust between the U.S. and Russia, aggravated by Russia's assertive actions in Ukraine and its broader revisionist posture (Fernandes and Cruz, 2022), along with the emergence of new actors on the international stage, such as China, Japan, and Iran, posed significant obstacles to the Obama administration's nuclear agenda (Addicott, 2014). As a result, the administration was forced to recalibrate its expectations regarding the scope and pace of arms control progress. The shift from a bilateral to a multipolar nuclear environment challenged the foundational assumptions underpinning the previous nuclear treaties. While the New START "regulated relations between Washington and Russia" (Fernandes, 2013) it increasingly appeared insufficient in addressing the broader spectrum of nuclear threats.

2.2 The Trump Administration and the 2017-2020 Arms Control Policy

Following the conclusion of Barack Obama's second presidential term on January 20, 2017, Donald Trump assumed office as President of the U.S, widely regarded as one of the most polarizing leaders in modern American political history. Trump not only challenged the foundations of American democracy but also emerged as a clear threat to it (Mearsheimer, 2019). While the onset of the Trump administration was characterized by significant political controversy, the subsequent years proved to be far from stable.

From a historical perspective, the presidency of Donald Trump further underscored the challenges confronting the liberal international order. His unilateralist and protectionist approach (most notably demonstrated by the withdrawal of the U.S. from several international agreements, including the Paris Agreement in 2015, the JCPOA in 2018, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty – INF in 2019) (Klotz, 2020) undermined the liberal values of cooperation and interdependence. These actions weekened traditional alliances and cast doubt on the U.S. long standing commitment to multilateralism and its role in upholding the norms of the international order (Klotz, 2020).

To further reinforce this posture, it is important to examine the dynamics during the Trump administration, particularly regarding the complex relationships between the U.S. and Russia. In December 2017, shifts in global power dynamics had a significant impact on the U.S. national security landscape. In response to these developments, President Trump (2017) presented a new strategic vision in Washington D.C., articulated through the release of the *"National Security Strategy"* (NSS). This document emphasized the doctrine of "America First", and advocated for the integrated use of military instruments to adress emerging security challenges. Moreover, the NSS (2017) marked a departure from previous strategic frameworks by explicitly acknowledging the return of great power competition (North Korea, China, and Russia). and outlining a more assertive and nationally focused approach to safeguarding U.S. interests in an increasingly contested international environment. As Trump affirmed (2017, p.2) that "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity."

Politically, the strengthening of ties between Xi Jinping and Putin symbolized a growing bloc of countries dissatisfied with U.S. global leadership (Fernandes and Cruz, 2022). Russia and

China, together with other emerging countries (Brasil, India, etc), were grouped under the acronym BRICS, signaling the recognition of these states as an emerging collective in global politics. This aliance signaled the emergence of alternative power centers within the international system, with Russia and China positioning themselves as influential actors not only among other states but also within global institutions (Fernandes and Cruz, 2022). Moscow and Beijing emphasized their shared opposition to Western interference in domestic affairs, and their intention to strengthen ties to challenge the U.S. led system of alliances and institutions. Moreover, on February 4, 2022, Russia and China formalized their partnership through a *Joint Statement on International Relations Entering a New Era and Global Sustainable Development*. In this declaration, both countries came to understand that joint action strengthened their capacity to project power, positioning them as central actors in what they framed as a historic shift toward a new international order.

In light of escalating challenges within the international arena, it became imperative to revise the U.S. nuclear strategy. In February 2018, the U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense published a document entitled *"2018 Nuclear Posture Review"*, reflecting the principles of "America First". This review raised a number of issues that contrast with the Obama-era emphasis on arms control and nuclear de-escalation, instead reaffirming the central role of nuclear weapons in national security and deterrence (Rose, 2018).

Amid this shifting geopolitical landscape, the U.S. tradionally dominant role began to face significant challenges. The NPR (2018) was explicit in addressing the renewed era of great power competition, closely aligning with the strategic priorities set forth in the 2017 NSS published two months earlier. Within this context, President Trump (2018) identified Russia and China not merely as geopolitical competitors, but as active threats to the strategic stability historically maintained by U.S. nuclear superiority. The review also highlighted the importance of a nuclear deterrent that is "flexible, adpatable, and resilient" (NPR, 2018, p.6). These characteristics of U.S. nuclear capabilities included the modernization of: "submarines (SSBNs) armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM); land based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM); and strategic bombers carrying gravity bombs and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs)" (NPR, 2018, p.9). In this context, nuclear modernization was pursued and emerged as a strategic imperative, not only to counter peer adversaries, but also to reassure allies of the U.S. enduring commitment to extended deterrence.

This renewed emphasis on nuclear flexibility was not simply tactical, but strategic (U.S. Secretary of Defense Mattis, 2018). It was intended to signal to adversaries that any form of nuclear aggression would provoke a proportionate response. Thus, the NPR (2018) not only reflected the Trump administration's broader unilateral approach toward arms control regimes but also institutionalized a more militarized and deterrence-centric approach to global security, reinforcing the administration's broader foreign policy agenda.

The decline of multilateralism under Trump administration marked by a preference for unilateralism (Mearsheimer, 2019) toward longstanding arms control agreements contributed to the erosion of strategic trust between major powers. Two key examples of this deterioration was the withdrawal of the INF, and the uncertainty sorrounding the New START. This configuration would remain unchanged in the following years. Between October 20, 2018, and February 1, 2019, tensions between the U.S. and Russia intensified due to mutual accusations of non-compliance with the INF treaty, which prompted a reconsideration of the U.S. commitment to the agreement. According to the U.S. Department of Defense (2018, p.10) "Russia's increased reliance on nuclear capabilities to include coercive threats, nuclear modernization programs, refusal to negotiate any limits on its non-strategic nuclear forces, and its decision to violate the INF Treaty and other commitments all clearly indicate that Russia has rebuffed repeated U.S. efforts to reduce the salience, role, and number of nuclear weapons."

In response to these persistent issues, President Trump (2019a) sought to enhance the protection of U.S. allies and partners while also pushing for a reassessment of Russia's behavior within the international security framework. However, rather than alleviating tensions, this approach had the opposite effect. The complexity of the negotiations failed to temper the assertive postures of both the U.S. and Russia, contributing to the decline of arms control cooperation.

As a result of the suspension, Trump (2019) formally withdrew from the INF Treaty in August, citing Russia's continued non-compliance as the primary justification. In response Putin (2019a) also suspended its participation, marking the definitive collapse of one of the cornerstone agreements of Cold War-era arms control. This mutual withdrawal not only intensified the strategic distrust between both powers but also created a vacuum in the regulatory framework governing intermediate-range nuclear forces (Charap and Curriden, 2019).

With the INF Treaty effectively dismantled, the focus of NAC shifted to the New START. Regarding the New START, Trump's administration delayed substantive negotiations over its extension (Klotz, 2020), as tensions surrounding nuclear weapons policy had significantly intensified.

Although Trump did not adopt a particularly proactive stance and maintained a pragmatic approach to the agreement, he nonetheless engaged in dialogue with President Putin. Negotiations to extend the New START treaty began in June 2020, in Vienna, as the agreement was set to expire in February 2021 (Russell, 2021). Reaching a new deal was imperative, with the central issue being the establishment of effective measures to ensure nuclear deterrence. After President Trump (2020) dismissed the possibility of a straightforward renewal, his administration insisted on expanding the scope of the treaty. In August 2020, he demanded that China to be included in any future negotiations, a condition that was repeatedly rejected by Beijing (Klotz, 2020). The administration's hardline stance, signaled a broader collapse in the arms control that had helped maintain strategic stability since the Cold War, showing little interest in renewing it.

The negotiation progress was slow, largely due to U.S. dissatisfaction with Russia's position. From the U.S. perspective, Russia appeared to benefit disproportionately (Alberston, 2023) from the existing terms emphasizing that any commitment to arms control was part of an ongoing strategic process. Despite this, Russia agreed, for the first time, to freeze its nuclear stockpile during the talks. However, according to Alberston (2023, p.19) "the agreement did not materialise due to the U.S. insisting that the freeze should be verifiable, whereas Russia only agreed to a politically binding commitment."

Trump's approach reflected a clear disregard for international legal principles and the fundamental obligation of good faith in treaty relations. His administration demonstrated a lack of commitment to the substantive provisions of the New START and failed to meaningfully engage in its preservation or extension. This attitude amounted to a disregard for both the letter and the spirit of the bilateral agreement with Russia. The breakdown in strategic dialogue, exacerbated by the U.S. unwillingness to uphold the norms of arms control diplomacy and contributed to the growing instability within the global nuclear order. Relations between U.S. and Russia became increasingly adversarial, contributing to a more fragmented and unstable international order. As a result "it was left to newly elected President Joe Biden to reprieve the treaty" (Russell, 2021, p.9).

2.3 The Biden Administration and the 2021-2023 Arms Control Policy

The election of President Joe Biden in November 2020 led to a significant turning point in U.S. NAC policy, contrasting with the previous administration's unwillingness to extend the New START. Biden entered office committed to restoring multilateral engagement and reinforcing global non-proliferation, framing the 2020 as a "decisive decade" (NSS, 2022, p.3) for strategic stability and international security.

The U.S. were anticipating that President Putin would adopt a more moderate stance in the nuclear domain. However, this expectation did not materialize. Although Russia continued to frame its position in terms of nuclear restraint, in practice it proceeded with the systematic modernization of its strategic forces, including the development of nuclear delivery systems and hypersonic weapons (Woolf, 2022; Charap and Curriden, 2024). As a result, the timeline for the extension of the New START once again became a matter of priority for the Biden's administration, as the deadline for renewal was set to expire on February 5, 2021.

On January 26, President Biden and President Putin (2021) held a telephone conversation, which they agreed to the extension of the treay for five additional years. This reflected a shared, albeit fragile, commitment to the preservation of the agreement and its associated mechanisms, despite the ongoing deterioriation in U.S.-Russia relations. This decision also represented a critical step toward maintaining mutual transparency and the verification protocols, as essential components for ensuring international strategic stability (Russell, 2021).

Aware of Russia's assertive posture and strategic ambitions, President Biden sought to establish dialogue in order to identify common ground and prevent further deterioration. This diplomatic overture culminated in the Geneva Summit on June 16, 2021 where Biden and Putin met in person for the first time as heads of state to discuss "a list of policy priorities in the two states" (Minzarari, 2021, p.1), including nuclear stability. Both leaders agreed to launch a Strategic Stability Dialogue (Charap and Curriden, 2024), aimed at laying the groundwork for future arms control measures beyond the New START. Nonetheless this momentum proved short-lived.

Following the summit tensions escalated. By october 2021 Russia began a large-scale military buildup along Ukraine's borders issuing demands for NATO non-expansion, seeking security guarantees (Osflaten, 2025). These actions signaled a confrontational approach and

foreshadowed a significant escalation. Just one year after New START renewal, the geopolitical landscape was dramatically reshaped by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 24, 2022, transforming the European security landscape (Fernandes and Cruz, 2022). The invasion not only violated IL and Ukraine's sovereignty, but also challenged the foundations of the post- Cold War security order (Fernandes and Cruz, 2022). For NATO (2022), Russia's actions represented a direct threat to the stability of Europe and the integrity of the rules-based international system.

This turning point prompted a comprehensive reassessment of U.S. strategic posture and defense priorities. In October 2022, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin released the document entitled *"2022 National Defense Strategy"*, issued alongside, and inherently integrated with, two key documents: the *"2022 Nuclear Posture Review"* and the *"2022 Missile Defense Review"*, with the overarching objective of establishing a choerent and comprehensive framework to adress emerging threats and guide the modernization of U.S. defense and deterrence capabilities.

An analysis of the three aforementioned documents demonstrates that the U.S. justified its shift in defense posture by highlighting that changes in the arms control landscape were presented as a central factor driving this transformation. Therefore, in light of the documents, the administration articulated a clear strategic framework: "first, defend the homeland; second, deter strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners; third, deter aggression and be prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary; fourth to ensure military advantage, build a resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem." (NSS, 2022, p.1).

According to the 2022 NPR (p.1), "Russia's invasion of Ukraine underscores that nuclear dangers persist." This statement underscored the growing concern within U.S. strategic circles that nuclear threats were no longer theoretical. The invasion, combined with repeated nuclear rhetoric from Russian officials, reintroduced the risk of nuclear coercion into international affairs. From Washington's (2022) perspective, the war in Ukraine posed not only a regional threat but a broader challenge to U.S. national interests and the security of NATO allies. President Biden (2022a) also responded with sanctions, targeting several sectors of Russia, such as energy, and defense, by providing as well substantial military and economic aid to Ukraine, signaling a strategic commitment to counter Russia aggression and uphold the sovereignty of democratic states.

This deterioration of the bilateral relations had direct consequences for arms control. In February 2023, amid the ongoing conflict and intensifying rivalry, President Putin (2023) announced that Russia would suspend its participation in the New START. While not formally withdrawing, Moscow accused the U.S. of hostile intent and declared that the conditions for continuing cooperation no longer existed. Putin (2023) also justified his decision by alleging that the U.S. and NATO were actively working againts Russian national interests and that the New START no longer served Russia's security need. Russia's suspension from the treaty represents a highly complex process, because it undermines decades of arms control frameworks (Osflaten, 2025). This suspension had a direct impact in Washington, raising more questions than answers, resulting in profound uncertainty and shifting geopolitical dynamics. In response, Biden's advisor Sullivan (2023) reaffirmed that the U.S. would remain in compliance with New START obligations for as long as it served national security interests. Ultimately, the legacy of Trump's reorientation of U.S. foreign policy created new tensions and uncertainties in arms control regime, leaving Biden in a fragile environment and bilateral mistrust.

2.4 U.S. Military Power under the Framework of New START

U.S. military capabilities under New START have been shaped from the outset by evolving geopolitical dynamics and techonological innovation. This unparallaled strategic and technological evolution has provided the U.S. with military advantage that continues to support its national interests. The combination of these various factors has extended the global reach and influence of the U.S., underpinned by its military power and a foreign policy grounded in realist and pragmatic interests (Blagojevic, 2019).

One of the core strategic objectives of the U.S. is to prevent, by nearly all available means, the rise of potential rival powers capable of challenging its global hegemony (Wolfley, 2021). This objective is reflected in a foreign policy oriented toward nuclear non-proliferation, as well as in a National Defense Strategy that prioritizes the development and maintenance of high capability military forces (Blagojevic, 2019). This strategic posture has necessitated the development of a global engaged foreign policy, positioning the U.S. military as a central instrument in securing national interests across complex and dynamic international landscape.

As American military power has attained global preeminence, the U.S. has been compelled to operate within an increasingly strategic environment, one that challenges and tests the coherence and reach of its foreign policy goals (Blagojevic, 2019). Therefore, strategic intelligence plays a critical role in realizing the full potential of U.S. power projection. Valuing this dimension means prioritizing forward looking analysis and decision making processes that enhance situational awareness and operational readiness. Moreover, reinforcing the state's capacity for strategic action becomes indispensable to preserving its global leadership and security imperatives (Simons, 2013).

Although the U.S. possesses fewer nuclear weapons than Russia in New START categories (see page 65), this is not merely a question of quantity. According to the Kymball (2025, p.2), as of March 2023, the U.S. had deployed "1,419 strategic nuclear warheads on 662 strategic delivery systems" and with an estimated "military stockpile at 3,700 warheads." Although capable of producing new warheads, the U.S. does so in very limited quantities, as it lacks the large-scale production capacity that Russia currently maintains (see page 65). This disparity reflects divergent modernization developments of both foreign policies rather than a simple numerical gap. The U.S. focuses on sustainment and technological reliability, while Russia prioritizes large-scale production and quantity.

U.S. warheads are designed to last for several decades, and through life-extensions programs, their service life are often extended even further. Rather than manufacturing entirely new warheads, the U.S. refurbishes older ones, retaining the fissile core while replacing or modernizing their components (Wolfley, 2021). These are considered "new" warheads in strategic terms, although they are not newly built from scratch. Because the overall number of available warheads gradually declines as older ones are dismantled, production and refurbishment rates must be carefully managed. Moreover, when the U.S. signed the New START, it did so with the understanding that the number of deployed nuclear warheads would not increase. Instead they committed to a strategy based on modernization, realibility, and long term deterrent capability within the limits imposed by the agreement (Simons, 2013). The main components of the U.S. military strategy and capabilities under New START are outlined in the table below, providing a structured overview of its strategic posture.

	Nuclear Use	Threats	Modernization	Strategies	Arms Control
2010 Nuclear Posture Review	Only if vital interests of U.S. and allies are threatened	Nuclear terrorism (rogue states)	Supports upgrades but reduces the role of nuclear weapons	Promotes global nuclear reductions	Strong support (signed New START)
2018 Nuclear Posture Review	Expand its use (includes response to non-nuclear strategic attacks)	Russia, China, North Korea, Iran	Full support (added low-yield nuclear weapons)	Attention on flexible deterrence adding limited nuclear options	Not interested in extending New START
2022 Nuclear Posture Review	Only if vital interests of U.S. and allies are threatened	Russia, China	Continues upgrades but canceled low-yeld nuclear weapons	Non-proliferation and risk reduction	Strong support (extended to 2026)
Under New START	Stayed within warheads liimits	Evolving threats justified modernization under New START	Strategic systems modernized under New START ceilings	Adapted strategies but all remained compliant	Remained effective. U.S. complied throughout

Table 2. U.S. Military Strategy: Nuclear Review Changes and Compliance with New START (2010–2023)

Source: by the author

CHAPTER 3 – The Evolution of Russia Nuclear Strategy and Arms Control Policy (2010-2023)

3.1 The Medvedev Administration and the 2010-2011 Arms Control Policy

The year of 2010 marked an apparent equilibrium of power within the Russian nuclear agenda. This balance, established through the introduction of the New START, allowed President Medvedev to adopt a more multilateral stance on the international stage. A key feature of his strategy was a concerted effort to foster dialogue through diplomacy, aiming to streghten Russia's external relations with "EU as a whole and the United States" (Krumm, 2010, p.11). However, another central objective of Medvedev was the modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenal, a priority that emerged in the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia war in 2008. The acquistion of the new strategic systems formed part of a broader modernization agenda, intended to restore Russia's defense tresholds and secure its national security interests (Haas, 2011). These objectives aligned with *"Russia's State Armaments Program 2020"*, approved by Medvedev on December 31, 2010. This program aimed to reorganize Russia's military structures (Air Defense, Strategic Rocket Forces, Navy equipment), with the first step being a "large-scale rearmament" (Gorenburg, 2010, p.1).

The 2010 document would signal the beginning of an arms development process that encourajed NATO to adopt a more permissive stance. By framing modernization as a response to evolving security threats (NATO expansion in post soviet states), the Kremlin sought to legitimize its military ambitions under the guise of national defense. Moreover, the development of U.S. missile defense systems in Europe in 2011, specifically in Poland and Czech Republic called into question the legitimacy and long-term viability of the New START, raising serious concerns about its effectiveness. In response to this actions, President Medvedev (2011a) warned that "Russia was prepared to deploy missiles in the Kaliningrad exclave" if the U.S. continued with its missile defense plans in Eastern Europe. This duality, reflected in Medvedev's administration, rendered his position uniquely distinct in relation to Russian strategic policy.

Before Poland, Latvia and Lithuania joined NATO in 1999 and 2004, Kaliningrad was a Russian exclave, a part of Russian territory separated from the main part of the country. With the expansion of NATO and the escalation of mistrust, Kaliningrad has effectively become an enclave, completely surrounded by NATO members. This shift has altered the geopolitical dynamics between Russia and its neighbors. Moreover the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems in

Eastern Europe, was viewed in Moscow as a direct threat to the credibility of Russia nuclear deterrent. Medvedev (2011a) also stated "that this step will be seen by our partners as the first signal of the readiness of our country to make an adequate response to the threats which the missile shield poses for our strategic nuclear forces". However, once Kaliningrad became an enclave sorrounded by NATO members, it became clear that it was now a strategic target.

Regarding the latter example, New START does not regulate missile defense systems. This omission has raised serious concerns within the sphere of international security. For instance, Russia repeatedly questioned the U.S. true intentions behind the development and deployment of missile defense infrastructure, particularly in Eastern Europe. Moscow argued that, without reductions on such systems, the treaty risked becoming strategically imbalanced (Medvedev, 2011a). As a result, Russia emphasized the need for future arms control negotiations to include explicit restrictions on missile defense systems, which had thus far remained outside the scope of New START. In response to these accusations and threats, former NATO Secretay General Rasmussen (2011a) stated that "NATO's missile defence system is designed to defend against threats from outside Europe. Not designed to alter balance of deterrence". Nevertheless, the level of distrust escalated to such an extent that, during the ratification process of New START in the Russian Federation Council, lawmakers raised the possibility of Russia withdrawing from the treaty. This position was articulated as a formal reservation, stating that if the U.S. continued to pursue missile defense developments that were perceived to threaten Russia's national security interests, Moscow would consider such actions.

Although the ratification of New START was approved by both countries legislative bodies, Russia remained apprehensive about the U.S. ongoing strategic advancements. In this context, there was an increasing domestic pressure for a more assertive stance, one that placed national defense and security at the center of state policy. Therefore, the 2012 Russian presidential election marked a turning point, ushering in a change in leadership that would prove highly consequential for the international community.

3.2 The Putin Administration and the 2012-2023 Arms Control Policy

The stability of the international order rests upon the balance between major powers, a core tenet of contemporary international relations. With the return of President Putin in 2012, this equilibrium was directly contested. Nuclear modernization emerged as a cornerstone of Russia's strategic development, reflecting a belief that increased armament was synonymous with enhanced national power and international influence. While New START remained in force, the tone and direction of arms control shifted significantly under Putin's administration. Putin (2012a) prioritized a more assertive national security agenda, framing military modernization, of Russia's nuclear forces, as essential to reasserting Russia's role as a global power. Putin (2012a) viewed the post-Cold War international order as unbalanced and increasingly hostile to Russian interests. Therefore, arms control was no longer seen as a tool of diplomacy, but as a strategic instrument to ensure military power and geopolitical leverage.

In his 2012 address to the Federal Assembly in Moscow, President Putin highlighted Russia's domestic problems and outlined how he intended to resolve them to ensure territorial prosperity. According to Putin (2012) these problems covered "economy, social sphere, domestic policy, international affairs and security issues." From this point forward, the structure of international political order became increasingly shaped by Russia's pursuit of strategic assertiveness and its reassertion of influence in global affairs. Putin understood that Russia's reconstruction could not be achieved through traditional Western models, but rather through a uniquely new Russian model centered on sovereignty to reaffirm Russia's territorial and strategic centrality. Putin (2012) deemed it imperative to initiate combat readiness programs as a key priority of his presidency, based on the belief that a future conflict with NATO was a plausible scenario. This initiative became associated with the doctrine of "new generation warfare", which emphasized military preparedness for future confrontations. Moreover, it involved the strengthening of Air Bases, Air Defense Systems, and the modernization of military divisions. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2020, p.36) this reform yielded several strategic advantages: "the establishment of a permanent combat-ready professional force; the modernization of military hardware; and the enhancement of Russia's power-projection capabilities."

Putin aimed to secure national advantages by positioning Russia to leverage military capabilities at strategically opportune moments, thereby increasing its power and limiting the

maneuverability of other international actors (Fournier and Kühn, 2014). However, this approach carried inherent risks, as it could provoke unfavorable shifts in the international environment, potentially triggering balancing behavior or escalation by rival powers. Therefore, Putin sought tactical openings that could improve Russia's strategic positioning vis-à-vis other states, especially within contested geopolitical landscapes.

The consolidation of military strength, alongside a reframing of arms control as a tool for power projection, found its first major test in the international arena with the annexation of Crimea. The annexation in March 2014 emerged as a major geopolitical turning point that disrupted the existing balance of power and significantly heightened tensions between Russia and the international community. For former NATO Secretary General Rasmussen (2014a) this act represented a deliberate effort by Russia to assert is military strength, using the annexation as a strategic move to reinforce its influence in the post-Soviet space. NATO also condemned the annexation as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and a breach of international law, regarding the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the UN Charter. According to the Memorandum (1994, p.169), Article 2 states that "The Russian Federation (...) reaffirm (its) obligation to refrain from the threat of use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine, and that none of (its) weapons will ever be used against Ukraine (...)." Putin (2014a), however, in his address to State Duma and Federation Council in the Kremlin, affirms that "Russia's Armed Forces never entered Crimea. They were already there in line with an international agreement."

The annexation marked a clear shift in Russia's foreign and security policy: the willingness to use force to defend what it perceives as vital national interests, even at the cost of international condemnation and escalating confrontation with the West. Moreover, the annexation was executed with a high degree of coordination, showcasing improvements in Russia's military capabilities, particularly in the use of special forces and hybrid tactics (Fernandes and Cruz, 2022). As a direct consequence of the annexation, Russia was removed from the G8, reducing it to G7, which now includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the U.S.

As mistrust between Russia and NATO continued to intensify, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2014a) declared that the time for Russia modernize nuclear and conventional arsenals has come. Lavrov (2014a) statement was a clear articulation of Russia's strategic objectives: to equip Russian Federation with advanced nuclear weaponry and to modernize its armed forces through the development of the next generation systems. This strategic articulation

was formalized on December 26, 2014, when President Putin approved for publication the document *Military Doctrine*. The Doctrine (2014, p.1 and 2) outlined "preparations for armed defense and on the armed defense" and "the main provisions of the military policy" of the Russian Federation.

Moscow's primary interest layed in the preservation of its sovereignty, which served as the focus of its foreign policy. This centrality of Russian power, and "the ability of the military to influence foreign policy decision-making, significantly increased during" the following years (Westerlund, 2021, p.44). The Doctrine (2014) also reaffirmed the ongoing importance of modernizing nuclear warheads as an important strategic factor. Moreover, the Doctrine emphasized Russia's "nuclear deterrence potential at the required level of readiness" (Doctrine, 2014, p.10) and, for the first time, highlighted the threat NATO poses to Russian national security. Another critical aspect adressed in the Doctrine is the use of information. According to Russia, the unnauthorized use of confidential information threatens its national and supreme interests, as foreign countries may gain access to internal data.

In response to Russia's posture, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg (2015a) reaffirmed the importance of strengthening defense in the face of growing challenges posed by Russia to both Europe and U.S. As a result, the Readiness Action Plan emerged as a top priority for the alliance. It aimed to "strenghten defense, assure all allies, improve the responsiveness and effectiveness of their forces, and deter threats from wherever they may come" (Stoltenberg, 2015, p.3).

Despite occasional statements from both sides about the value of arms control and deterrence, New START remained stalled during this period. However, Kristensen (2016, p.1) noted that "Russia continued to increase the number of strategic warheads", indicating a consistent effort to modernize and expand its nuclear arsenal. Although Russia appeared to be intensifying its strategic nuclear planning, the U.S. Department of Defense (2012) had mentioned before limited concern. According to Kristensen (2012, p.7), they believed that "Russia would not be able to achieve a militarily significant advantage by any plausible expansion of its nuclear strategic forces, even in a cheating or breakout scenario under New START".

However, for Russia "the Soviet-era nuclear missiles and systems represent the core of its strategic nuclear capabilities (Fournier and Kühn, 2014, p.1). As a result, the Russian government prioritized the development and deployment of next-generation strategic weapons. These weapons include "both long-range, strategic systems, including intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs),

submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers, and shorter, and medium-range delivery systems" (Woolf, 2022, p.2). The development of these Russian long and medium range nuclear missiles serves a defensive purpose, by enabling the capability to strike U.S. territority in the event of a large-scale conflict. Therefore, conventional weapons were viewed as insufficient to ensure strategic deterrence. This shift toward a multipolar world marked by an increasing competition for power had significant repercussions on how Russia and the U.S. approached their defense and strategic security policies (Mearsheimer, 2019).

In this sense, New START gained renewed importance. With Trump becoming the new president of the U.S. in 2017, Putin promptly expressed interest in reopnening conversations about the treaty provisions. However, following the 2018 Russia-U.S. summit held in Helsinki, Putin (2018a), during an interview with Fox News, asserted that the U.S. was not "fully compliant with the treaty." Nonetheless, he reiterated Russia's expressed intent and readiness to pursue an extension of the New START, stating that Moscow was open to "prolong it", provided both parties could "agree on the specifics first." Putin emphasized what he regarded as the core principle that should guide Russia's participation in the agreement. This principle was the role of nuclear deterrence, which he consistently framed as a critical pillar of national security and strategic stability. However, Russia's criticism of the U.S. was both explicit and persistent. From Moscow's perspective, NATO actions were seen as a direct challenge for stability. In accordance, General Gerasimov (2019), Chief of the General Staff at the Russian Academy of Military Science, stated that "the United States continued to encroach close to Russian territory with military infrastructure, and to undermine strategic stability, including by the withdrawing from the INF Treaty and by its possible future refusal to extend the New START Treaty."

As a result of the deterioration of security environment, the *2020 Basic Principles on Nuclear Deterrence* document was approved by Putin. This marked a significant development in Russia's approach to military strategy, reflecting a redefined role for the country in exercising its defense capabilities (Kofman, 2021). It sets out the priorities of the Russian state in matters of defense, in alignment with its national interests, and constitutes an integral part of its national defense policy. The principles are characterized by a vision in which a set of strategies emphasizes Russia's power and resolve, particularly in cases where non-violent means fail to resolve conflicts. According to Kofman (2021, p.5) "Russia's military (...) measures deter conflict and manage escalation." He further highlights that one of Russia's priorities is "deterrence and escalation management."

This approach has become fundamental, since nuclear forces are framed not only as instruments of deterrence but also as mechanisms to secure strategic influence. In this sense, Russia's interests involve asserting its presence on the international arena, defending the country's external credibility, and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. This posture stems from the inbalance of power between Russia and the U.S. According to Gerasimov (2019a), the "United States and NATO are the sources of global instability" expressing clear dissastisfaction with the positions adopted by NATO and its European allies.

Putin (2021) accused the U.S. and clearly stated his demand for a return to the 1997 *status quo*, referring to the rebalance of power and competition between both post-Cold War era rivals. However, these demands quickly became unacceptable, as they interfered with the freedom of choice of European countries, particularly those wishing to join NATO. Despite this, the continued U.S. presence near Russia's borders led Putin to criticize NATO for disregarding Russia's security concerns. According to Putin (2021), the Russians "didn't see an adequate response to their key concerns: non-expansion of NATO, the refusal to deploy offensive weapons next to Russian borders and bringing back military infrastructure of the alliance to the status quo of 1997 (...)." For Putin (2021), NATO's intentions were clear: to gain direct access to Russia's borders, thereby threatening its national interests and using Ukraine to achieve this objective. This deep dissatisfaction had significant implications on the international stage, ushering in a new geopolitical climate of tension. This would ultimately contribute to the unraveling of the New START framework.

Although the extension of the New START underscores a continued mutual effort on nuclear deterrence, the international debate over strategic nuclear policy reached new levels of intensity, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russia's position was framed as defensive and robust, as Moscow opposed the growing influence of NATO, which it perceived as a direct threat to Russia's national sovereignty and regional sphere of influence (Fernandes, 2022). NATO's continued eastward expansion was seen as catalyst for renewed geopolitical confrontation, compelling the Russian Federation to assert its strategic interests and defend its territorial integrity. In his speech in Moscow, President Putin (2022a) emphasized that, "in December 2021 an attempt was made to reach an agreement with the United States and its allies on the principles of ensuring security in Europe and on the non-expansion of NATO."

As a powerful nuclear state, Russia seeks to exclude NATO as a potential adversary by developing military advantages in regions of strategic interest (Ukraine) or in areas where it has

traditionally exerted influence (Kaliningrad). In doing so, Russia aims to stabilize its sphere of influence, preserve its strategic advantages, and limit U.S. competition in the region. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia has taken increasingly assertive actions. Nuclear weapons have since been at the forefront of the conflict, with constant threats from Putin directed at Ukraine and NATO drawing the attention of international elites, particularly the UNSC. As noted by Murithi (2022, p.66), the UNSC's collective security mechanism "failed to create the framework conditions to facilitate the mediation of the crisis due to the systemic constraints created by the veto powers of the Permanent Five (...)."

One of the most critical turning points in Russia's posture was the suspension of its participation in New START in February 21, 2023. Putin (2023a) framed the suspension as a response not only to NATO's growing involvement in the Ukraine conflict but also to what he described as a breakdown in the mutual understanding that underpinned the treaty. Putin (2023) stated that NATO wanted "to inflict a strategic defeat on the Russian and claim their nuclear facilities." Moreover Putin (2023) also claimed that the West had weaponized arms control by restricting Russian access while continuing to benefit from transparency into Russia's arsenal.

The accusations of Putin to NATO didn't held down. In his statement at the day of suspension Putin (2023) accused NATO allies of deploying nuclear-capable drones against Russia, reinforcing that russian sovereignty was under direct threat and could not afford to comply with New START in a wartime environment. In response to this accusations NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg (2023a) said that "nobody is attacking Russia. Russia is the agressor." This dangerous escalation of military power in the absence of the New START regime highlights the deepening mistrust between Moscow and the West, underlining how New START, once a domain of cooperation, has now been instrumentalized as a tool of confrontation.

3.3 Russia's Military Power under the Framework of New START

Shifts in global power dynamics have significantly influenced the framework of Russian security policy, prompting a departure from its previous strategic paradigm. The goals pursued by Russian foreign policy in defense of national interests vary according to the country's evolving needs. Military power is employed as a key instrument to protect Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as

a mean of safeguarding its elements of national defense and internal security (Keep and Heslop, 2023).

Russia's military capabilities constitute a core pillar of state security and play a vital role in projecting its international influence. As such, the military dimension remains central to the implementation of Russian foreign policy. In accordance, Gerasimov (2020) stated that "Russia's military forces are the ultimate guarantoor of the nation's defence." Throughout the 21st century, Russia has undergone political and military transformation, becoming increasingly strengthened and with its power concentraded in its military force. This transformation conceptualized its military power within the regulatory framework established by New START.

The large-scale production of nuclear warheads has enabled Russia to assert itself as a dominant land-based military power, suporting its broader territorial ambitions (Keep and Heslop, 2023). This military capacity reinforces the structure of the Russian political system, especially through the development and expansion of its nuclear infrastructures and industry. As a result, Russia's military power is not only regional but also global and transformative in nature.

Russia is producing nuclear warheads at a rapid rate, although many of these have relatively short operational lifespans. According to Kimball (2025, p.1), as of September 2022, Russia possessed "1,549 strategic warheads on 540 strategic delivery systems" with an estimated "military stockpile of approximately 4,380 nuclear warheads." However, obtaining up to date data has become increasingly difficult since Russia suspended its participation in the New START, effectively halting mutual inspections and formal data exchanges. This emphasis on rapid production underlines Russia's commitment to maintaining strategic parity with, or even superiority over, its competitors.

Therefore, Russia projects its military power with international assertiveness and considers nuclear development a central core of its power (Russell, 2021). The advancement of its nuclear arsenal not only ensures deterrence but also serves as a means of reinforcing its gobal status. President Putin has defended the assertive direction of Russian military strategy, claiming they send a clear and concrete message, in constrast with NATO's approach, which, in his view, rest on a narrative shaped by the historical legacy of U.S. dominance.

The main components of Russia's military strategy and capabilities under New START are outlined in the table below, providing a structured overview of its strategic posture.

	Nuclear Use	Threats	Modernization	Strategies	Arms Control
2014 Military Doctrine	Allowed if Russia faces WMD attack or existential threat	NATO enlargement Missile defense systems in Eastern Europe	Upgrade forces by 2020 (production of advanced weapons)	Defense Posture (deter Western interference)	Supports New START although criticizing U.S. decisions
2020 Principles of Deterrence	Equal 2014 Doctrine, with openness to TNW for deterrence	NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe	More than 70% of forces modernized	Defense Posture (deter Western interference)	Supports New START in a growing mistrust environment
Under New START	Under nuclear limits	Strategic threats perceptions justified nuclear modernization within New START	Strategic delivery systems upgraded, within New START	Modernized within New START limits Strategic balance	Complied unitl February 2023

Table 3. Russia's Military Strategy: Doctrinal Changes and Compliance with New START (2014–2023)

Source: by the author

3.4 Assessment of Strategic Arsenals under New START: U.S. vs. Russia

The visible increase in military production in the years preceding the entry into force of New START was accompanied by a gradual intensification of strategic competition between the U.S. and the Russian Federation (Woolf, 2021). Although the treaty sought to stabilize bilateral relations and establish verifiable ceilings on nuclear arsenals, both parties entered the framework from markedly different structural positions. Russia retained advantages in terms of overall military resources and pursued an extensive modernization program that diversified and expanded the reliability of its nuclear forces (Woolf, 2021). By contrast, the U.S. relied on an arsenal that was largely based on aging systems. Modernization in the U.S. often took the form of life-extension programs, in which the fissile cores of older warheads were removed and adapted for redeployment rather than replaced by entirely new designs (Wolfley, 2021). This reinforced perceptions of imbalance: Moscow sought to consolidate its posture through numerical strength and the preservation of substantial stockpiles, while Washington emphasized the precision and survivability of a smaller but modernized force to safeguard national interests.

However, the exchange of reliable information under New START was essential for assessing the scope of both states perspectives on nuclear weapons (Woolf, 2021). This credibility shaped their views, fostering common objectives and the sharing of mechanisms. Nevertheless, the persistent mistrust, as previously mentioned, influenced the ongoing process of military modernization, which was already a point of constant debate (Russell, 2021). The analysis of the arguments highlights the detrimental effects of Russia's suspension of New START, which ultimately reinforced distrust rather than mitigating it. This environment shaped the evolution of the two states nuclear arsenals. Both states sought to comply with the numerical limits established by New START while simultaneously pursuing qualitative improvements to their strategic capabilities (Russell, 2021). Military developments, including upgrades to warheads and delivery systems were accelerated, reflecting a strategic calculus that prioritized both deterrence and long-term power projection.

The table below enables us to understand the dynamics of nuclear modernization between the U.S. and Russia. It focuses on three key years: 2011, marking the period following the ratification of the New START treaty after 45 days; 2018, the deadline established for both parties to reduce their strategic nuclear arsenals in accordance with the treaty's predetermined limits; and 2022, the final year in which mutual notification exchanges between both states took place.

	Year	Deployed Warheads (1,550)	Deployed and Non-Deployed Launchers (800 and 700 = 1,500)	Warheads Stockpile (reserved for potential use)
U.S.	2011	1,800 (reduce 250 until 2018)	1,124	2,850
	2018	1,350	800	2,200
	2022	1,419	800	1,964
Russia	2011	1,537	855	3,700 – 5,400 (estimation)
	2018	1,444	779	2,750
	2022	1,474	761	2,889

Table 4. Comparison of nuclear warheads and stockpile under New START

Source: by the author

The data presented in the table above demonstrates that both nuclear powers complied with the quantitative limits established by New START since its ratification. However, the figures also reveal significant asymmetries. In 2022, Russia maintained a larger overall stockpile reserved for potential future use (2,889), marking an increase compared to 2018, while the United States consistently retained a smaller reserve (1,964) throughout the years. The persistence of such large stockpile indicates that, despite reductions, nuclear weapons remain indispensable to both states power status and deterrence strategies. Although nuclear and military capabilities remain central

elements of U.S. and Russia power projection, they are complemented by advanced technological and strategic instruments. The persistence of such substantial stockpiles highlights the continued centrality of nuclear weapons in both power status and deterrence. These reserves in stockpile enhance each state's ability to shape the expectations of potential adversaries. For Russia, a larger stockpile will reinforce its global influence, while for the U.S., a smaller but technologically advanced reserves allows for national defense and security of its European allies. This confirms that nuclear weapons continue to be indispensable tools of statecraft, affecting bilateral relations and the international security environment.

Moreover, the evolving geopolitical configuration also prompted a reassessment of spheres of influence, particularly in Ukraine, which became open to competition. Hence, each side recognizes that the other persistently seeks to preserve and expand its influence and power, thereby sustaining a relationship marked by enduring rivarly (Keep and Heslop, 2023. The perceived threat from Russian expansion contributed to a potential intensification of nuclear competition with the U.S., further justifying continued investment in nuclear modernization.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the significant expansion of nuclear capabilities in the U.S. and Soviet Union during the Cold War, it became evident that both powers sought to safeguard their national interests, employing nuclear deterrence as a central strategy to prevent the use of force. Holding approximately 90% of the global nuclear arsenal today, a concentration of power that solidified over the course of the Cold War, their strategic dominance was decisive in the establishment of SALT and START treaties. This framework culminated in the New START, which sought to institutionalize arms control regimes, reducing the risk of escalation inherent in nuclear rivarly.

However, the convergence of enhanced military capabilities with nuclear question further reinforced the centrality of deterrence in their strategic doctrines. These dynamics remained consistently observable troughout the evolution of bilateral relations and the broader trajectory of international politics during the nuclear era. They have had a substantial influence on the New START over the years, on its inception, implementation, and interpretation. To understand the post-2009 New START process, it was essential to examine the U.S. and Russia foreign policies, and the landscape of the arms control regime.

In the introduction of this dissertation, the following research question was posed:

How the U.S. and Russia perceive their military power projection under the framework of New START?

To address this question in a way that guarantees scientific relevance, the study was situated within a choerent theoretical lens: Neoclassical realism. This perspective allowed for a systematic examination of how both nuclear powers perceived military power under New START in relation to their strategic objectives, framed by the principles of nuclear deterrence.

The second chapter examined U.S. foreign policy, focusing on three administrations directly involved with the New START: Obama, Trump, and Biden, and their respective positions on arms control policy. A clear divergence emerged between the approaches of each presidency, and these differences proved significant in shaping the trajectory of the New START.

The treaty resulted from an extensive process of internal political negotiations. The Obama administration adopted a clear stance in presenting the New START as a step toward the goal of a "world without nuclear weapons." Nonetheless, its position, remained firmly anchored in the protection of U.S. national interests, ensuring the preservation of strategic stability, and maintaining a credible bilateral nuclear balance with Russia. President Obama, argued that nuclear modernization should proceed strictly within the treaty's limits, ensuring that these limits were not exceeded. His administration modernized capabilities not covered by New START while reducing deployed strategic warheads to below 1,550, capitalizing on the U.S. considerable strategic advantage at the time (see Table 4, p.65). For Obama, a stable security environment was paramount. Therefore, military modernization efforts were pursued with caution and responsability, explicitly avoiding escalation with Russia despite persistent concerns over its strategic behavior.

However, Trump administration reduced the treaty's perceived importance. Consistent with the "American First" doctrine, President Trump expressed persistent dissatisfaction with several multilateral agreements, leading to the suspension and withdrawal from a number of them. In nuclear policy, his approach diverged sharply from that of his predecessor, prioritizing the expansion and renewal of U.S. military and nuclear capabilities. This development of new nuclear weapons systems, such as low-yeld warhead on ballistic-missile submarines and new hypersonic weapons, was essential to maintaining American strategic predominance over Russia. Trump's distrust of the New START led his administration declined to pursue an extension of the treaty, citing doubts about Russia's compliance and asserting that the agreement imposed undue constraints on U.S. military modernizations and its associated programs.

Amid the emerging strategic order shaped by Trump administration, Biden administration reaffirmed the strategic value of the New START, extending it until 2026. Biden's approach was to restore equilibrium and maintain the balance of power as essential to safeguard U.S. national interests, while recognizing the necessity of continued nuclear modernization. The development, production, and upgrade of warheads became central of the U.S. deterrence posture. At a time where Russia was increasingly positioning itself in opposition to the values and security interests of the West and its allies, New START functioned not merely as an arms control agreement, but as a mechanism of deterrence. As an argument for the U.S., by imposing limits on strategic warheads, New START provided a framework that constrained Russia's capacity to expand its nuclear arsenal without triggering reciprocal measures by the U.S.

This evolution of arms control policies reveals the understanding that the U.S. military power has consistently been perceived by a combination of strategic foresight and the imperative to safeguard national defense interests. Although New START enabled reductions in deployed strategic warheads, the U.S. maintained a cautious posture toward nuclear development. This would guarantee security and readiness in the event of heightened tensions with Russia. However, based on the analysis of available data, the U.S. did remained committed to New START requirements, with the nuclear stockpile showing a significant reduction decrease during the timeframe of this case study (see Table 4, p.65). However, enduring mistrust toward Russia meant that nuclear programs and productions were at no point halted. On the contrary, a strategy of continuous modernization was pursued as a form of deterrence to maintain strategic balance. Moreover, the U.S. monitored Russia's military advances with close attention, recognizing it as a substantial threat in potential bilateral escalation. As a result, this case study on the U.S. evolution on arms control policies indicated a clear recognition that modern nuclear weapons are integrated into a broader deterrence strategy.

Russia's perception of its military power under the framework of New START, its possible to identify with the increasingly defense posture, which intensified as international dynamics evolved. Under President Medvedev, Moscow adopted a stance that paralleled President Obama's cooperative discourse. Nonetheless, in 2011, Russia expressed growing concern over NATO's continued enlargement and the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems In Eastern Europe. These were perceived as directly threatening to Russia's national interests and security. Hence, during the ratification process of New START, these issues represented the most contentious points debated in State Duma and Russia's Federation Council. The sensitivity of the matter was such that resurfaced in subsequent discussions about potential follow-on negotiations that would incorporate missile defense into the New START framework. However, these negotiations weren't realized. Russia even raised the possibility of withdrawing the New START, arguing that the U.S. altered the balance of power. From Medvedev perspective this was an attempt to alter deterrence and thereby securing a strategic advantage for Washington. These unresolved security concerns exposed New START structural limits: that it couldn't fully neutralize the mutual mistrust between both states.

Even after ratification, Russia perceived its power projection not solely through the treaty compliance, but as a dependent on a credibility of its military forces. The unresolved missile

defense issue served as a warning for Russia that arms control could not substitute for tangible military strenght. With Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, this would gave way to a more assertive and confrontational posture. In line with deterrence theory, Moscow expanded the modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces, framing them as essential not only to prevent a possible escalation by the U.S. but also to guarantee freedom of action in regional conflicts. NATO's expansion and U.S. missile defense initiatives in Eastern Europe were perceived as threats, reinforcing Russia's belief that arms control regimes, such as New START, while fundamental, weren't enough for replacing military strenght. New START effectiveness as a cooperative framework proved limited strategic stability between the U.S. and Russia.

This argument became evident in moments of high geopolitical confrontation. The 2014 annexation of Crimea demonstrated Russia's readiness to employ significant military force in pursuit of geopolitical objectives, in clear defiance of Western expectations of restraint. More recently, the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 underlined the structural fragility of arms control regimes when confronted with Russia's broader strategic ambitions. To Russia, military power under the framework of New START wasn't solely about treaty compliance or bilateral cooperation with the U.S. Rather, it was understood as a critical instrument of statecraft and deterrence.

Putin invested heavily in weapons development and the militarization of Russia. In this sense, Russia's power, grounded in military strenght and prestige, began to acquire greater influence in the international arena. Several factors stood out in explaining the invasion of Ukraine: the prospect of Ukrainian accession to NATO and the resulting alliance, which would automatically transform Ukraine intro a strategic adversary; the objective of consolidating control and thereby ensuring the hegemony of Russia's sphere of influence; and the broader imperial and militaristic orientation of Putin's policies. The military offensive also sought to secure leverage over Ukraine due its critical geostrategic value. Russia under Putin has been increasingly characterized by a government underpinned by militarization, a factor that generated mistrust from the U.S. and shaped the broader balance of power. This trajectory confirms the centrality of military power in Russia's foreign policy, where it operates as a mean of influence for its strategic posture.

To conclude the present research, it was possible to address the guiding question that structured the entire process of investigation and writing. The study demonstrated that, in such a

competitive environment, the prospect of military force is, under no circumstances, absent. Nevertheless, its significance lies not only in actual deployment but also in its capacity to shape adversarial behavior without immediate recourse to open conflict. By maintainig credible and modernized armed forces, both states convey their readiness to respond decisively to what they perceive as escalatory actions. From the perspective of both states, military capability is not regarded merely as a shield of defense but as a central instrument of deterrence. The balance between the U.S. and Russia is therefore not determined exclusively by arms control regimes, but by the credibility of their military capabilities as the main element of strategic stability.

This scientific contribution to the field of IR offers a solid basis for further investigation inquiry. One possible avenue for future research would be a comparative case study of the U.S. and Russia in the aftermath of the suspension of New START, analyzing how strategic stability is redefined in the absence of a biding arms control framework. Another direction would involve examining the dynamics following the possible extension, or non-extension of New START in February 2026, as well as the associated nuclear risks (escalation), and the potential for renewed arms race.

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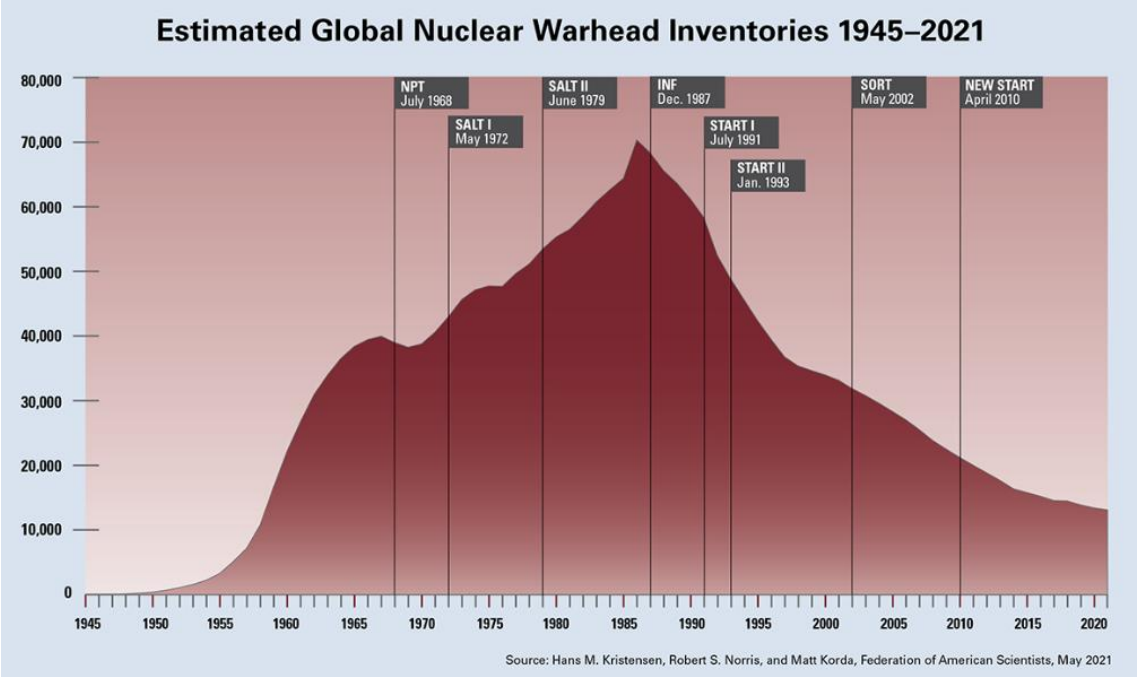
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ANNEXES

1.



2.

Estimated Warheads in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine in 1991

	Strategic Warheads	Tactical Warheads
Belarus	100	725
Kazakhstan	1,410	Uncertain
Ukraine	1,900	2,275

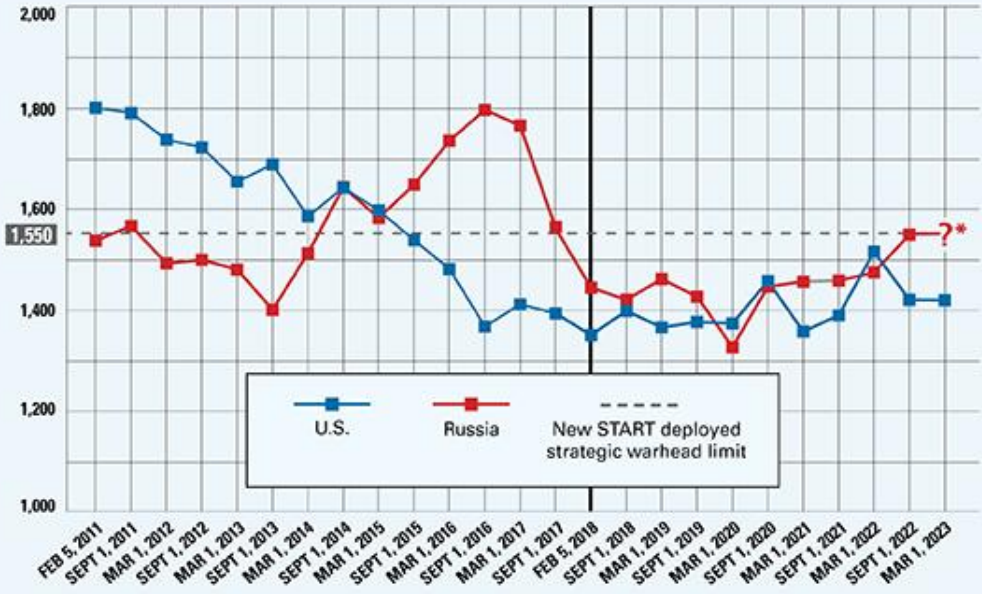
Sources: Robert S. Norris, "The Soviet Nuclear Archipelago," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 1992, p. 24; and Joseph Cirincione, et al., *Deadly Arsenals*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005, p. 366.

3.

Deployed U.S. and Russian Nuclear Warheads: The Path to Meeting New START Limits

The 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty started a countdown to deployment limits that took effect February 5, 2018. The uneven path toward the limits reflects the nuclear weapons modernization programs implemented by both nuclear powers.

The treaty permits each side to have no more than 1,550 warheads on deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and deployed heavy bombers assigned to nuclear missions (each heavy bomber is counted as one warhead).



Updated December 12, 2024

*On Feb. 21, 2023, Russia suspended implementation of New START and stopped bilateral semiannual data exchanges. The United States made public its deployed warhead figures for March 2023 unilaterally.

Arms Control Association