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HIGH-LEVEL SEGMENT OF CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT (CD) 2026:

CHARTING THE FUTURE OF ARMS CONTROL

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary nuclear order is undergoing significant transformation, marked by intensifying great power competition, rapid technological change, and weakening arms control frameworks. Against this backdrop the meetings of the Conference on Disarmament (CD) started on 19 January 2026. The high level segment of CD took place from 23 to 27 February 2026, with representatives of member states delivering the official positions. Their statements reflected shifting dynamics, as major nuclear powers articulated increasingly divergent views on the future of arms control, strategic stability, and non-proliferation. At the core of these debates was the question of transition from bilateral to multilateral arms control. The United States has emphasized on including China in future arms control discussions, Beijing and Moscow have advanced alternative approaches centered on their interests. This Strat view examines the positions articulated by key stakeholders at the CD, evaluates the prospects for multilateral arms control in a multipolar world, and assesses the emerging challenges that are reshaping the global nuclear order. The article argues that the push towards multilateral arms control is structurally constrained by deep asymmetries in nuclear capabilities, divergent strategic priorities, and growing geopolitical mistrust among great powers. As a result, prospects for comprehensive multilateral agreements remains limited, and the CD should serve as a platform for incremental risk-reduction measures.

STATEMENT BY THE UNITED STATES

The representative of the United States highlighted their viewpoint on the shortcomings of New START treaty – inability to address major Russian nuclear systems and the absence of any arms control agreement with China. The statement of the United States was focused on criticizing China and highlighting the ongoing developments of its nuclear programme to build a case for an arms control agreement with Beijing. The United States has alleged that China might achieve parity with it in the next four or five years. The US representative pointed out that China was the only P5 country without a moratorium on fissile material production for weapons purposes. The United States expressed distrust in Chinese no-first use commitment, citing its growing arsenal as a contradiction to this position. Trump administration through their statement in CD has made it clear that there is no more possibility of bilateral arms control agreement with Russia. They also alleged that Moscow violated the treaty after the start of Ukraine conflict and exceeded the limits of New START over past few years.

From their point of view, there should be a transition to multilateral arms control which they believe is the necessary next step. The United States has said that P5 forum is one certain platform for the multilateral arms control talk and is invoking Article VI obligation of NPT to push Russia and China into a multilateral agreement.

To put further pressure on China, the representative of the United States, Christopher Yeaw, reiterated the allegation of China conducting nuclear tests using decoupling methods to obscure their detection. The position of the United States reflects an attempt to recalibrate arms control frameworks in response to China's rise, but avoids addressing strategic concerns raised by Moscow and Beijing. This asymmetry can weaken Washington's ability to build consensus for multilateral arms control, and its proposals can be rendered as selective and interest-driven.



STATEMENT BY CHINA

The representative of China expressed concerns regarding the strategic behavior of the United States, pointing out initiatives like the Golden Dome, forward deployment of land-based intermediate range missiles, and nuclear modernization programme which undermine global strategic stability. Without naming the United States, Beijing accused Washington of creating crisis on the one hand and calling for reducing nuclear risks on the other – terming it as a hypocritical approach. China reiterated its commitment to no-first-use and a nuclear strategy of self-defense acknowledging its nuclear modernization programme as a national security safeguard. Beijing pointed out that they have no appetite for a nuclear arms race with any other country. He categorically rejected the call of the United States to join trilateral nuclear arms control discussions.

China asked for all nuclear weapon states to conclude a mutual treaty on no-first-use of nuclear weapons to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons. Beijing vehemently rejected the accusation of the United States representative of conducting nuclear tests and termed them as an excuse for resuming nuclear testing. China has criticized the AUKUS agreement dubbing it counter to the NPT and also opposed nuclear sharing, extended deterrence and other similar arrangements. The focus of remarks by Chinese representative was directed towards the United States as a direct response to their push for multilateral arms control and accusation of nuclear testing. Moreover, China also reaffirmed its stance of promoting international arms control system with the UN at its core.

China's position highlights a posture focused on normative measures because of the capability gap for formal arms control agreements. By promoting normative measures such as a P5 NFU while rejecting trilateral negotiations, Beijing signals a preference for arms control frameworks that cannot constrain their modernization trajectory.



STATEMENT BY RUSSIA

The representative of Russia criticized the role of western countries in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Russia showed dismay at the American dismissal of their proposal to commit voluntarily to keep the quantitative ceilings of the New START. The representative pointed out that states that are under the nuclear umbrella of the United States should not be considered for Negative Security Assurances. Russia warned that the decision of the United States to conduct nuclear tests can lead to a 'domino affect' and Washington would be responsible for the consequences.

Moscow pointed to the risks associated with AUKUS like agreements on non-proliferation regime, highlighting the effects particularly on Nuclear Weapon Free Zones (NWFZs).

He also called for the establishment of a NWFZ in Middle East and called on Washington and Tel Aviv to play a role in it. Russia also called for the development of an internationally legally-binding instrument on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS).

The basis for this is the draft treaty submitted by Russia and China in the CD. According to Moscow, the importance of PAROS has increased significantly in the light of the Golden Dome initiative of the United States. The position of Russia highlights their broad strategic competition with the West. It emphasis on including United Kingdom and France can further complicate negotiations, expanding the scope of multilateral arms control to a level that is difficult to operationalize.



STATEMENT BY PAKISTAN

The representative of Pakistan while outlining the increasing global insecurities reiterated the need for a legally binding Negative Security Assurance as a confidence-building measure for Non-nuclear weapon states. Pakistan also expressed support for discussion on PAROS. Islamabad highlighted the challenges posed by Emerging Technologies like military applications of AI to nuclear stability and pointed out the responsibility of CD – as the single multilateral negotiating forum – in tackling them. Pakistan also mentioned its proposal for a new mandate regarding Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) to address the issue of fissile material stocks comprehensively by including existing fissile material stock in its scope.

Pakistan highlighted increasing risks of nuclear use in South Asia especially during the May 2025 when India employed dual-capable and autonomous military capabilities. He also pointed out that Pakistan has put a proposal for Strategic Restraint Regime in South Asia on the table since 1998 which has not been answered by India nor an alternative proposal has been given. The representative pointed out that if risk reduction and strategic stability is the goal why was there no interest in it on the Indian side.



Finally, Pakistan emphasized the need to strengthen multilateralism under the UN machinery over strategic alliances. Pakistan's emphasis on NSAs and emerging technologies introduces practical risk-reduction measures that can be pursued as a viable way-forward for strengthening non-proliferation regime.



MULTILATERAL ARMS CONTROL: A POSSIBILITY

The world has entered a new nuclear age. The geopolitical contours of this nuclear age are different from the previous two ages. During the first nuclear age, the world order was bipolar guided by a great power competition between the United States and the USSR. There were different bilateral arms control agreements signed between the two states during the Cold War representing the realities of the time. However, after the demise of the USSR, a second nuclear age was conceptualized for the unipolar world order. With the peaceful rise of China the world has entered into a multipolar order with a great power competition at the center of it. The United States has clearly outlined its goal of pursuing multilateral arms control citing the modern day geopolitical realities and eschewing the possibilities of bilateral arms control agreements. However, despite the rise of China, its nuclear arsenal falls far short of the United States and Russia.

In terms of numbers, according to western sources, Chinese nuclear weapons stand at around 600 warheads, while the United States is estimated to possess around 3700 nuclear warheads and Russia has a stockpile of 4300 weapons. Similarly, in terms of qualitative nuclear capabilities, the American and Russian nuclear forces exceed far in number the Chinese forces. The possibility that the United States and Russia would agree to reduce their nuclear forces to match China is bleak. Similarly, any expectation that China would freeze its nuclear modernization given the huge capability gap with the United States is wrong. In its recent white paper on arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation, China has reiterated their position, “Countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals should fulfill their special and primary responsibilities for nuclear disarmament and continue to make drastic and substantive reductions in their nuclear arsenals in a verifiable, irreversible and legally-binding manner.”

The United States, as evident through its statement in the CD, has linked any possible arms control agreement in which it wants China included. However, at the same time, Washington is wary of arms control proposals put by Beijing and Russia on the table. China has reiterated its proposal for a P5 commitment of No-First-Use which has not received positive nod from the United States. Similarly, China and Russia have presented a draft text of PAROS treaty in the CD. However, the United States has kept a different approach and is even contemplating developing space-based interceptors for its Gold Dome Project.

Moreover, agreements like AUKUS are another major non-proliferation issue on which the United States and China hold diverging views. Beijing and Moscow have criticized the agreement, terming them opposed to the spirit of NPT.

The United States, on the other hand, is yet to provide a substantial proposal for any kind of arms control agreement that includes both China and Russia. Similarly, Russia has strategic anxieties regarding the nuclear programmes of the United Kingdom and France besides the United States. The recent announcement of President Macron to overhaul French nuclear doctrine would also complicate arms control dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic region. France has announced a policy of 'forward deterrence' and removed any kind of cap on the development of nuclear warheads.

For Russia, any future multilateral arms control agreement would mean an inclusion of France and the United Kingdom. The complexities of a multipolar world order are visible in regard to a multilateral arms control treaty either including the United States, Russia and China or the P5 states.



FUTURE OF ARMS CONTROL

The heightening risks of nuclear crisis during the Cold War led to bilateral arms control agreement between the United States and the USSR. However, despite increasing nuclear risks today the possibility of multilateral arms control agreements look bleak. All nuclear weapon states are involved in a nuclear modernization process and upgrading their force postures. There are weak prospects of convergence of interests of major powers. Instead of pursuing ambitious but unrealistic frameworks, states should prioritize incremental, pragmatic measures that reduce risks and build confidence.

The possible pathway for states is to utilize the existing multilateral platform of CD to make some progress towards arms control and risk reduction measures. First, nuclear weapon states should advance legally binding NSAs to address the growing insecurity among non-nuclear states.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and war on Iran by Israel and the United States has shifted the focus on the importance of nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantor of security. This has also increased the risks of horizontal nuclear proliferation. However, measures like NSAs strengthen the credibility of the non-proliferation regime and reduce the incentives for horizontal proliferation.

Second, the Conference on Disarmament should shift its focus on the more important issue of emerging technologies and their increasing interaction with nuclear weapons. The interaction between AI, cyber, and nuclear command-and-control systems present immediate risks that require urgent multilateral engagement.

Third, instead of focusing on discriminatory treaties like Fissile Material Cut off Treaty (FMCT) which cannot reduce the strategic anxieties of all states the focus should be on exploring inclusive frameworks that address both future production and existing stockpiles, thereby reducing strategic asymmetries.

Fourth, major powers - particularly the United States, China, and Russia - should initiate structured strategic stability dialogues aimed at identifying areas of convergence, including crisis communication mechanisms, de-escalation protocols, and transparency measures.

Finally, there is a need to reinforce multilateralism under the United Nations framework, while avoiding bloc-based approaches that deepen strategic divisions. Without a minimum level of trust and cooperation among major powers, arms control efforts will remain stalled.



