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Nuclear Risk Reduction: Executive Branch Policies and Congressional Approaches in the 119th Congress

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Following the February 2026 expiration of the 2010 New START arms control agreement, which reduced U.S. and Russian strategic offensive nuclear forces, some Members of the 119th Congress have held hearings and debated legislative proposals related to nuclear risk reduction. *Nuclear risk reduction* generally refers to information exchanges, operational constraints, or transparency measures (e.g., nuclear crisis hotlines or ballistic missile launch notifications) that are less formal than *arms control* and aim to reduce the risk of inadvertent or accidental nuclear war. Such cooperative or unilateral measures may aim to mitigate the risk that conventional conflict unintentionally escalates to nuclear weapons employment.

An Under Secretary of State said in February 2026 the United States would "pursue responsible pathways to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world, consistent with President Trump's vision and our obligation under the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty] … through both bilateral and multilateral venues." The 2023 final report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States stated, "arms control and risk reduction … contribute to the goals of U.S. nuclear strategy by shaping adversary perceptions and capabilities, decreasing uncertainty, and reducing the risk of miscalculation."

Congress plays a role in risk reduction, which, like arms control, may be implemented pursuant to treaties or agreements negotiated by the executive branch. The Senate considers providing advice and consent to treaty ratification. Congress can exercise oversight of the executive branch's nonbinding or political commitments that may not require Senate action. Congress authorizes and appropriates funds for, and provides oversight of, the Department of State (DOS) and other agencies that negotiate, implement, monitor, and verify compliance with relevant treaties and agreements.

Executive Branch Policies

An Assistant Secretary of State said in February 2026, "The United States proposed multilateral strategic stability talks as a means to achieving future arms control." The second Trump Administration has sought to advance some of its nuclear risk reduction goals through the *permanent five (P5) process* that includes the United States, Russia, the People's Republic of China (PRC or China), the United Kingdom (UK), and

France. The P5 has periodically issued statements, such as one in January 2022, restating a 1985 declaration by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

According to a May 2026 DOS statement, the United States proposed starting P5 working groups and certain risk reduction measures, including P5 ballistic missile launch notification and P5 nuclear crisis communication, though these U.S. efforts "have not yet gained consensus." In July 2026, the Secretary of State said, "if you're going to have true arms control, it has to be triparty," involving the United States, Russia, and China.

Russian officials state they have sought "tangible improvements in [overall] U.S. policy toward Russia," especially following what they described as a lack of Trump Administration interest in Russia's September 2025 proposal to extend New START numerical limits. Russian officials have reiterated interest in including the UK and France in nuclear talks and their commitment to certain bilateral U.S.-Russian nuclear risk reduction measures, such as ballistic missile launch notification and nuclear crisis communication.

PRC officials have previously declined to join nuclear talks, arguing China possesses fewer nuclear weapons than Russia and the United States. Despite past U.S.-PRC discussions on the potential stabilizing influence of regular bilateral ballistic missile launch notifications, China reportedly gave little advance notice to the United States of its July 6, 2026, submarine-launched ballistic missile test. It is unclear if the United States and China have taken any steps in line with their 2024 statement on "the need to maintain human control over the decision to use nuclear weapons."

On November 19, 2026, U.S., Russian, and PRC leaders issued a statement following their trilateral meeting in Shenzhen, China, that stated, in part, "The three heads of state reaffirmed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. The three countries will conduct a dialogue on reducing nuclear risks and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons."

North Korea has rejected negotiations on its nuclear weapons since the most recent talks broke down in 2019. Some experts see nuclear risk reduction as an alternative to full denuclearization or an interim step to prevent nuclear conflict.

The United States has sometimes facilitated risk reduction between India and Pakistan, most recently in spring 2025. The neighboring countries—whose relations "remain a risk for nuclear conflict," according to the 2026 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community—maintain a ballistic missile launch notification agreement, among other measures.

Congressional Approaches

Several hearings on arms control and nuclear risk reduction have been held in the 119th Congress, including

- a Senate Foreign Relations Committee expert hearing on December 10, 2025, on "Arms Race 2.0" and a March 24, 2026, oversight hearing;
- a House Committee on Foreign Affairs oversight hearing on March 25, 2026, and an April 29, 2026, expert hearing on emerging threats to U.S. space security; and
- a Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) expert hearing on February 3, 2026, on "Strategic Competition in an Unconstrained, post-New START Treaty Environment."

Some Members have introduced legislative provisions related to nuclear risk reduction:

- H.Rept. 119-698, accompanying a House Armed Services Committee-reported National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2027 (NDAA; H.R. 8800), includes a

provision for a Pentagon report to include a description of department "activities in support of arms control and risk reduction objectives, including recommendations, if any, provided by the Department on key attributes of a future multi-lateral arms control agreement."

- S.Rept. 119-127, accompanying a SASC-reported FY2027 NDAA (S. 4784), includes a provision directing Pentagon officials to brief congressional defense committees on "existing and potential nuclear and space risk reduction measures" involving the United States, Russia, and China.
- H.R. 8086 would codify the DOS National and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center (NNRRC) that is to report to the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security. The NNRRC was first proposed by some Members in 1982 and established by the Reagan Administration in 1987.
- S.Res. 61 and H.Res. 100 call for U.S. dialogue with Russia and China on nuclear risk reduction and arms control.

Members may continue to conduct oversight through hearings and legislation. Members may consider requesting briefings from Administration officials on U.S. nuclear risk reduction engagement with adversaries through the foreign affairs, defense, and intelligence committees and through the Senate National Security Working Group, which "may authorize [M]embers to act as official observers on the United States delegation" to relevant negotiations.

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