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The INF Treaty: Europe needs to act

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For a long time, there have been warnings of a possible end to the INF Treaty, one of the few remaining nuclear disarmament treaties between the United States of America and the former Soviet Union, which entered into force 30 years ago in June 1988. That possibility could soon become a reality. On 20 October 2018, US President Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States from the treaty in response to complaints about Russian non-compliance. It is conceivable that the treaty could end even before 2018 is over.¹ Although Europe is not a party to the treaty, the agreement is a core element of European security. For this reason, Europe must react quickly and in as unified a manner as possible. It is vital to urge both parties to save the agreement – and to modernise it if necessary. Otherwise, an escalating arms race is possible, and this would threaten strategic stability in Europe.

A 30-year success story is at stake

The treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union on the elimination of their intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles, or INF Treaty,¹ is one of the few remaining disarmament treaties still restricting the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia. The treaty is the only instrument to have eliminated a whole category of nuclear-armed missiles on both the American and Russian side. Specifically, this included all nuclear ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km. These missiles posed a threat mainly to Europe's security. The treaty entered into force on 1 June 1988, and now, just before the end of its 30th year, it is on the brink of collapse.

In a campaign speech on 20 October 2018, US President Trump threatened that the United States would withdraw from the treaty in response to Russia's alleged non-compliance. The allegations concern a type of land-based cruise missile known to the United States as the SSC-8, which supposedly has a cruising range prohibited by the INF Treaty. According to press reports, Russia not only tested the missiles in 2017, but also began stationing them in the Yekaterinburg area and near the Caspian Sea. Suspicions that Russia has been violating the INF Treaty are not new. The first unconfirmed reports of possible non-compliance appeared as early as 2008, and the Obama administration first raised these concerns with Congress members in 2011. The treaty has been openly in jeopardy at least since the first formal statement on Russian violations of the treaty by the US Department of State in its annual "Compliance Report" to Congress in 2014.² Several attempts by the United States to urge Russia to ensure transparency and abandon the missile programme in question have been unsuccessful. Even though there is still no absolute certainty regarding the matter, all NATO partners now support the allegations levelled by the United States at Russia and are pressing Moscow to return to compliance.³

¹ *Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles*, signed on 8 December 1987 and in force since 1 June 1988.

² *Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/2018/280532.htm>

³ Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers of 4 December 2018.

So far, Russia has denied all accusations of non-compliance and is demanding definite evidence from the United States, which Washington has not yet been willing to disclose for reasons of secrecy. Since Russia has in recent years also extensively upgraded its treaty-compliant intermediate-range and shorter-range ballistic and cruise missiles, such as the Iskander-M and Kalibr types, and has used them successfully in the Syrian War, Russia's motivation for a possible breach of the treaty remains a mystery. Therefore, NATO circles had assumed that Russia would be the one to provoke an end to the treaty because in principle it rejects this agreement, which was concluded between the former Soviet Union and the victor of the Cold War.

Instead, Russia's response has been limited to accusing the United States itself of violating the treaty. There are three central elements to the Russian counter-accusations: (1) The use of missiles in missile defence tests (Ballistic Missile Defence/BMD) with characteristics similar to those of intermediate-range and shorter-range ballistic missiles, (2) the development of missile defence bases in Romania and Poland, which are supposedly able to launch not only defensive missiles but also land-based cruise missiles⁴ and (3) the purchase and use of intermediate-range armed drones, which Russia considers to be banned under the INF Treaty as well. The United States has carefully considered the accusations made by Russia and rejects each of them categorically as baseless. Both the accusations by the United States against Russia and the counter-accusations from Moscow are hard to confirm or falsify without knowledge of or access to classified information. This is something only the parties to the treaty themselves can do.

Does diplomacy still stand a chance?

The upside is that the announced withdrawal of the United States from the treaty will provide an opportunity to openly discuss differences and to have diplomacy working again. By his summit meeting with North Korean President Kim Jong-un in Singapore, US President Trump has shown before that he is willing to combine considerable pressure and dialogue to break diplomatic deadlocks. On the other hand, the threat of withdrawal gives Russia the opportunity to blame the termination of the treaty on the United States and to continue pursuing its own strategic objectives unimpeded. The Russian military establishment in particular has been deeply concerned for a long time about the development of Chinese and Indian intermediate-range missiles. The termination of the treaty would allow Russia to defend itself with own intermediate-range missiles against perceived or real threats at its eastern and southern flanks. However, since the targets of Russia's treaty-prohibited intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles would lie chiefly in Europe, Europe can have no interest in such a development and must itself take a clear stance.

This is particularly true as Russia is already trying to put pressure on individual NATO members and to divide the Alliance through increased nuclear sabre-rattling as well as large-scale exercises and verbal threats against NATO states on the Alliance's eastern flank. Russia is also developing its sea-based intermediate-range capabilities and regularly deploys land-based missiles with treaty-compliant shorter ranges to its western border and to the enclave Kaliningrad for exercises. This complex situation and in particular Europe's concerns do not appear to trouble President Trump. He is demanding not only greater financial support from Europe for Washington's commitment to its NATO partners. The unilateral cancellation of the nuclear deal with Iran against the expressed interests of the European states, which continue to back the agreement, also shows that US priorities take clear precedence over the security interests of other nations, including those of Europe ("America first"). Europe now has to quickly determine what the risks would be for the western Alliance and for European security in particular if the INF Treaty ended. This debate has to be undertaken also with the broader public. That is the only way of preventing division within NATO and domestic upheaval that could result from possible unilateral decisions and responses by the United States.

⁴ These missile defence stations, also referred to as "Aegis Ashore", are technically based on the treaty-compliant Mk 41 launchers used on ships. While the Mk 41 can also launch cruise missiles, according to the US government, the land-based version has been modified in such a way that it can only launch defensive missiles but not offensive surface-to-surface weapons.

The options discussed so far in the United States for a post-INF era (which not always represented the views of the majority within the administration) range from (1) responding by means of new or an increased number of conventional countermeasures and (2) terminating other remaining disarmament treaties or allowing them to expire (in particular New START) to (3) developing new land-based nuclear and conventional intermediate-range and shorter-range missile systems (and possibly deploying them in Europe).

Russia's refusal to even admit that there is a problem had, among other things, already prompted a bill in the US Congress that would not only force the president to ascertain whether Russia had breached the treaty but, if this were the case, also earmark funds for developing new intermediate-range weapons and upgrading missile defence.⁵ If there is proof that Russia has again deployed prohibited intermediate-range weapons, the fourth option is that the United States would also have to develop such systems and possibly deploy them again on the European continent, a view held by individuals within the US military and Congress. Without going into detail about the measures in question, it is especially this last option that brings back memories in Europe of the heavy domestic disputes particularly in Germany, but also in other European NATO countries, in the 1980s in connection with the NATO double-track decision of 1979.

Back then, the fissure within NATO ran through Western Europe and could only be mended with great difficulty by the NATO double-track decision, whereas today it would probably open up between Western and Eastern Europe. Poland, but also other Eastern European NATO countries that have always felt particularly threatened by Russia, might not only welcome but actively pursue the deployment of such missiles on their territory in bilateral agreements or within the NATO framework on account of the protection such missiles would provide. In Western Europe, however, the deployment or redeployment of land-based nuclear, and probably even conventional, intermediate-range and shorter-range systems would presumably lead to some tough domestic debates.

Proponents of renewed deployment in Europe, however, do not see that the strategic situation has changed fundamentally since the 1980s. The US intermediate-range missiles deployed in Europe at the time as part of the NATO double-track decision were supposed to prevent the Soviet Union from browbeating European NATO countries with its own intermediate-range missiles, since Europe would have been strategically "decoupled" without a US nuclear counterweight on European soil. There would always have been the question of whether Washington could have credibly used the long-range nuclear weapons stationed in the United States as pushback against Soviet threats against Western European states, as this would have exposed the United States to the Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles aimed at the American continent. Would a US president, for instance, put the city of Chicago at risk of a nuclear attack in order to protect Frankfurt? For this reason, the deployment of US missiles was actually advanced at the time by European heads of government and among them chiefly by German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.

Today the situation is completely different in both respects. There is now a multitude of conventional and nuclear sea-based as well as air-launched systems on both the American and the Russian side that could be used in the event of a military escalation without this resulting in a global nuclear exchange of intercontinental ballistic missiles between the two countries. The logic underlying the decision to modernise theatre nuclear forces in the 1980s in order to maintain a "continuum of deterrence" and to "couple" the nuclear weapons in Europe to the intercontinental capabilities of the United States does not apply today as it did then. Furthermore, the deployment of US missiles in Europe would be a measure against the will of many of the governments of NATO countries, particularly in Western Europe.

⁵ *Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty Preservation Act of 2017*, p. 430, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/430>

What is Europe supposed to do?

First, the European NATO countries should urge the United States and Russia to use the remaining time between the announcement of the withdrawal and a possible end to the treaty for intense talks not just at the level of senior officials (US National Security Adviser John Bolton visited Moscow in October). This is a task for the highest political echelon, that means Secretary of State Pompeo or Secretary of Defence Mattis⁶ or possibly even the presidents themselves. It may be recalled that the phase of disarmament following the end of the Cold War began with talks at the highest level between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev and between George H. W. Bush and Boris Yeltsin. Perhaps the talks originally planned between President Trump and Russia's President Putin in the margins of the G20 summit in Argentina at the end of November will provide the first impulses for this.

Second, a serious attempt could be made to get China, India and Pakistan, which themselves are developing or have deployed intermediate-range missiles and are not bound by the INF Treaty, on board with the agreement and thereby make the INF Treaty a multilateral one. This is unlikely to succeed, but the attempt should still be made. German Foreign Minister Maas already raised the issue during his recent visits to Beijing. Including China, India and Pakistan in the agreement would counter the arguments made repeatedly by Russia as well as parts of the US military that their voluntary commitment to the treaty has placed the United States and Russia at a disadvantage vis-à-vis these nuclear powers, which are not bound by any restrictions to their nuclear arsenals. To increase the willingness of Asian countries to enter into nuclear arms control regimes, a broader discussion is needed and one that should address additional questions of strategic stability in Asia, such as China's projection of power in the South China Sea, the deployment of US missile defence systems in Japan and South Korea as well as the nuclear balance between India, China and Pakistan.

Military responses by the West should not be completely ruled out. It would be in the West's own interest, however, to keep those well below the level of violating the treaty. This could include intensifying the rotating presence of NATO troops in the Alliance's eastern territory. Upgrading NATO's missile defence capabilities in Europe, which could also intercept Russian intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles, would be an option, but should be considered with care. The reason for this is that it would contradict NATO's current position, according to which such capabilities are not directed at Russia but at threats from outside the Euro-Atlantic area, for instance from Iran, Syria or North Korea. If such a decision were to be made, it would have to be accompanied by a strong initiative to maintain dialogue with Russia and to ensure transparency in order to counteract Russian accusations that NATO's missile defence system is already aiming to change the strategic balance vis-à-vis Russia.

It is essential that every effort be made to discuss and negotiate the accusations of non-compliance and to initiate corrective measures. This is provided for by the verification mechanism (Special Verification Commission) laid down in Article XIII of the INF Treaty. This commission convened in November 2016 and again in 2017 but has yet to produce results. If the political will exists on both sides, another possible first step would be informal "transparency measures" below the threshold of verification, such as an offer to mutually open the bases in question for on-site inspections by the other side. As in the case of North Korea, such a "political" step could possibly break the deadlock. Too much optimism would, however, be unwise. Real verification cannot be done simply by visual inspection but would demand very thorough analysis. The American side, for instance, claims that the software of the US missile defence launch facilities in Romania and Poland does not permit launching banned cruise missiles. That the United States – and Russia – would open their missile bases for such a thorough inspection is not very likely at the moment.

⁶ See endnote: Secretary of Defence Matthis has resigned in December 2018.

Europe must above all develop its own initiatives and positions on how to respond if the treaty expires and the arms race threatens to intensify. If Europe wants to assume more responsibility on security issues, this would include defining its own (nuclear and non-nuclear) interests. Now is the time to make suggestions on how to not only defend the international arms control architecture but also revitalise it. Europe, acting with one voice, could push for the INF Treaty to be transformed into a multilateral agreement, could step up its role in conventional defence within NATO, and could ensure that the redeployment of nuclear intermediate-range missiles remains the last resort at least as long as Russia does not operationally deploy such systems in greater numbers.

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¹This paper is the English translation of a working paper initially published in German in December 2018. Since then, developments with regard to the INF Treaty have overtaken some of the concrete recommendations.