

# The INF Treaty: Pulling Out in Time

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## Abstract

The Trump administration has suspended its obligations under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Critics of this decision argue that it is strategically unwise: it hands Russia a propaganda victory, widens existing divisions among its NATO allies, and risks an arms race in Europe. Such criticisms are overstated, however. What—if any—propaganda benefits the Kremlin may enjoy will be outweighed by the backlash to its own aggressive behavior. NATO members have so far supported the United States' decision. A global arms buildup is underway, but budgetary considerations and the nature of the military environment in Europe will inhibit any US-Russia arms race from spiraling. Rather than being an end unto itself, the very purpose of an arms control agreement like the INF Treaty was to ensure mutual vulnerability—a condition that will still hold between Russia and the United States. Nevertheless, withdrawing from the INF Treaty could improve the US security posture against Russia and China in a manner that improves deterrence.

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On 2 February 2019 the Trump administration announced the suspension of its obligations under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Ratified in 1988 by the United States and the Soviet Union, this arms control agreement banned all ground-based missiles and launchers of ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. The INF Treaty partly derived its significance from being the first major arms control treaty between the two superpowers that called for the elimination of weapons that were *already* deployed. Previous arms control treaties only stipulated production and deployment limitations.<sup>1</sup> As such, the INF Treaty helped boost confidence between two rival superpowers and contributed to the end of the Cold War. But by the time Donald Trump became the US president, it was moribund. The Obama administration had already accused Russia of violating the treaty. For its part, Russia had already signaled its

interest in renegotiating it to involve other countries like China. Russia has even accused the United States of breaking the treaty with the deployment of a missile defense system in Europe. Nevertheless, critics of the Trump administration's decision to suspend its treaty obligations contend that doing so hands the Kremlin a propaganda victory, in addition to triggering an arms race and sowing discord among allies. However, such criticisms are overstated. Indeed, arms control agreements are means to an end rather than ends unto themselves. If the desired ends are not being realized, then the means must change. Although the Trump administration must articulate more clearly its strategy for moving forward in the post-INF world, the decision may prove to be the correct one, especially if it allows the United States to put more pressure on China and Russia.

To appreciate the significance of the INF Treaty and what implications its demise has—or does not have—for European security today, a brief overview of the treaty is necessary. How Russia has violated the treaty is instructive as is the impetus for US withdrawal, the key criticisms of withdrawal, and the current theater context.

### **Origins and History of the INF Treaty**

The basic problem that confronted US and other Western defense planners during the Cold War pertained to the military balance. The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact enjoyed numerical superiority in conventional forces in Europe. Owing to the expense of keeping large standing armies in peacetime and the political controversies that would attend any major buildup of West German forces, the United States sought recourse in its nuclear weapons arsenal to deter any significant Soviet aggression. The United States introduced shorter-range, so-called tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use in theaters of operations close to where adversaries resided. Treaty allies like West Germany, Japan, and South Korea hosted these weapons on their own territory under special arrangements that were eventually designed to mitigate any risk of theft or unintended use. These weapons included artillery, ballistic missiles of various ranges, cruise missiles, and gravity bombs that could be fitted on fighter aircraft.

To cover a broad range of military contingencies and to take advantage of recent technological advances, the United States and its NATO partners improved the quality of their conventional forces in Europe and began to deploy tactical nuclear weapons, especially in West Germany.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1960s, NATO appeared to have more options for confronting the Soviet military threat on the battlefield, with “flexible response” being the strategy embraced by the alliance to modulate its use of conventional and nuclear

weapons in accordance with the type of aggression that the Soviet Union might undertake. If the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact did launch an attack against Western Europe, then short-range tactical nuclear weapons could slow, if not stop it, with decision makers on both sides having—in theory at least—opportunities to de-escalate the confrontation.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, whether operational plans for wartime really changed with “flexible response” is debatable: according to historian Francis Gavin, the notion that nuclear escalation could be controlled was fiction.<sup>4</sup> Still, nuclear weapons were the basis for deterring any major attack by Warsaw Pact forces, even if it was exclusively conventional. This state of affairs persisted after the Soviet Union attained strategic parity with the United States in the mid-1960s.

In the late 1970s the Soviet Union began to replace the SS-4 and SS-5 theater ballistic missiles with the SS-20.<sup>5</sup> This intermediate-range missile could strike targets in Western Europe but not those in North America, thereby exposing a gap in NATO’s deterrence posture. At the time, Washington could either unleash nuclear weapons based in the continental United States on Soviet cities or could authorize their battlefield use in the heart of Europe. It lacked the ability to attack Soviet cities with nuclear weapons forward deployed in Western Europe. West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt famously highlighted this gap in a speech delivered at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London in October 1978.<sup>6</sup> US decision makers initially were reluctant to address these concerns. President Jimmy Carter wanted to pursue nuclear disarmament, whereas his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, believed that “the Soviets would not use nuclear weapons first and might be restrained even if they had superiority in nuclear weapons.”<sup>7</sup> A State Department briefing memo admitted that “in military terms, the SS-20 has not . . . much undermined NATO doctrine.”<sup>8</sup> Yet something had to be done. Unfortunately, for Western European decision makers, the solution was not as easy as putting into place additional nuclear deployments in Europe that could attack the supply lines and rear-guard forces of the Warsaw Pact if necessary. Public opinion in West Germany was becoming antinuclear, with the new deployments having the potential to undermine East-West détente and West Germany’s foreign policy of Ostpolitik. These concerns mattered for Chancellor Schmidt if he wished to retain the support of the Free Democratic Party for his ruling coalition in the late 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

The solution that ultimately emerged was the dual-track decision. To address credibility concerns, NATO oversaw the deployment of 464 ground-launched cruise missiles and 108 Pershing II missiles in Western Europe.

According to historian Kristina Spohr Readman, alliance considerations—rather than military ones—drove this particular track.<sup>10</sup> The second track pertained to arms control. Rising antinuclear and pro-disarmament sentiments in Western Europe could not be ignored, and so the compromise was to link the new deployment to calls for the United States and the Soviet Union to work together toward reducing intermediate-range nuclear forces from Europe.

These developments paved the way for what would become the INF Treaty. Of course, other factors pushed the two superpowers toward greater security cooperation. Not least among them were US president Ronald Reagan's antipathy for nuclear deterrence and Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's desire to recalibrate Soviet foreign policy by retrenching strategically and pursuing rapprochement with the West. Still, the INF Treaty had both symbolic and military value once their two countries signed it in 1987 and ratified it the following year. Symbolically, the INF Treaty deepened trust between two rival superpowers and helped bring the Cold War to an end.<sup>11</sup> Militarily, the treaty eliminated all land-based ballistic and cruise missiles and launchers with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, regardless if they were nuclear-armed or conventional. It also provided for a robust inspections regime that would last 12 years, ensuring that both sides would comply in destroying the banned weapons. It did allow air- or sea-launched missiles, however.

Two items are worth highlighting. The first is that the large numbers of nuclear weapons in Europe—of intermediate ranges or otherwise—reflected both military and alliance considerations. US defense planners understood that Warsaw Pact forces enjoyed numerical superiority with respect to conventional military power. They also came to appreciate that threatening a nuclear response to Soviet aggression by unleashing weapons from the continental United States would not assure those allies that could be isolated and picked off. Nuclear weapons at various rungs of the escalation ladder appeared necessary for deterrence. Second, the INF Treaty itself was partly the product of alliance politics. The buildup of Pershing II missiles in the early 1980s was a response to the SS-20 deployments. The United States initially did not want to pursue this buildup. But from the perspective of Western European allies like West Germany, the United States could only appear as a credible security guarantor if it at least matched Soviet capabilities. Ultimately, the INF Treaty benefited European security because it removed about 2,600 prohibited ground-based missiles and launchers, which the Soviet Union had prioritized over air- and sea-launched missiles. War in Europe would still be devastating, but

at least decoupling would not be as severe a problem for the United States as before.

### ***The Twilight Years of the INF Treaty***

The 1990s passed without incident for the INF Treaty. Russia (and other post-Soviet states like Ukraine) inherited the Soviet Union's commitment to the arms control initiative and continued to destroy nuclear weapons as part of a much larger effort to lighten its force posture. Although Russia came to depend more on its nuclear arsenal to deter large-scale conventional aggression, which in turn involved moving away from Soviet-era declarations not to be the first to use nuclear weapons in a militarized conflict, no violations of the INF Treaty occurred.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, the INF Treaty weakened over time. Although the INF Treaty was to last indefinitely, Article XI provided for regular or challenge (i.e., short-notice) on-site inspections to be operative for the first 13 years. Both the United States and Russia allowed this verification mechanism to expire without devising anything to replace it. Accordingly, national technical means of inspection such as satellite observation became the default tool for the signatories to monitor treaty compliance. Darya Dolzikova writes that the verification gap created by Article XI expiring “precluded the possibility of identifying and investigating [any] violation in a timely, rigorous and impartial manner.”<sup>13</sup> As early as 1988 a US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence anticipated this concern. It determined that “in particular an illegal force of GLCMs [ground-launched cruise missiles] could probably not be detected nearly as promptly nor with the same degree of confidence [as a ballistic system]. This is due to their much smaller size and to the fact that they are in almost all respects identical with and virtually indistinguishable from sea-launched versions of the same missile.”<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, a Special Verification Committee remains in place, thus providing a forum for discussing potential instances of noncompliance. However, it does not conduct regular investigations or articulate the protocols for performing them.<sup>15</sup> Geopolitics also strained the INF Treaty. In 2007 the Russian secretary of defense at the time—Sergei Ivanov—purportedly told his US counterpart Robert Gates that Russia's withdrawal from the treaty was desirable because it would then have the means “to counter Iran, Pakistan, and China”—countries that sit either on or near its borders.<sup>16</sup> Whether this exchange took place or not, Russia did try in 2007 to multilateralize the treaty so other states could sign. It won US support at the UN General Assembly, but the effort languished.<sup>17</sup>

## **Russian INF Violation**

Rumblings about a possible Russian treaty violation began in the latter half of the 2000s. Diplomatic exchanges between the two countries in 2013 touched on US concerns about Russia's INF compliance, but the matter remained mostly rumor. Nevertheless, the controversy intensified in July 2014 with the State Department's publication of the 2014 Compliance Report and with President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry flagging the violation directly with their Russian counterparts, Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov, respectively. A meeting convened in September 2014 specifically for addressing this issue failed to alleviate US concerns, with the Russian delegation denying that any violations took place at all and making counter-accusations that Washington itself was in noncompliance. Efforts to address the matter persisted throughout 2015 and 2016 but saw little success. The 2016 edition of the State Department's Compliance Report found that a "cruise missile developed by Russia meets the INF Treaty definition of a ground-launched cruise missile with a range capability of 500 km to 5,500 km, and as such, all missiles of that type, and all launchers of the type used or tested to launch such a missile, are prohibited under the provisions of the INF Treaty."<sup>18</sup> The US House of Representatives and the Senate demanded more information about Russia's compliance record and beseeched President Obama to explain how he planned to address concerns about Russian treaty violation.<sup>19</sup> The impasse persisted even after Donald Trump became US president. Though his administration initially signaled that the United States would remain in the INF Treaty, President Trump declared his intent for the United States to withdraw on 20 October 2018. Russia's violation was not the only reason Trump gave to explain this decision. He noted that other countries like China were not party to the agreement. About six weeks later Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the United States "has found Russia in material breach of the treaty and will suspend our obligations as a remedy effective in 60 days unless Russia returns to full and verifiable compliance."<sup>20</sup> Unsatisfied with how Russia responded to this announcement, the United States began the six-month withdrawal period for exiting the treaty on 2 February 2019.

What exactly has been the purported violation? The Obama administration was reluctant to disclose its evidence, encouraging experts to offer many conjectures as to which Russian missile contravened the INF Treaty.<sup>21</sup> Some alleged that the Obama administration sat on the information to avoid criticisms of its Russia reset policy and to shepherd the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) through Congress.<sup>22</sup> A more

persuasive explanation is that because the United States has had to rely mostly on satellite observation to monitor Russian compliance, it needed more information before it could confidently raise the issue. Over time the United States became more forthcoming. In late 2017, Christopher Ford of the National Security Council revealed at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC, that the noncompliant GLCM was the Novator 9M729 (or to use the NATO designation, SSC-8 “Screwdriver”). It appeared that the 9M729 missile might have been using the Iskander-M launcher, which had been deployed in the Kaliningrad exclave in November 2017 after having already been fielded in the area for military exercises since at least 2014.<sup>23</sup> This specific launcher can carry short-range ballistic missiles that can themselves carry different warheads, including nuclear ones. It has provoked much consternation in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania because many of their urban and industrial centers fall within its 400–500 kilometer (250–310 mile) range. To return to compliance, Russia would have to agree to eliminate this launcher if it were ever used to test the offending missile.<sup>24</sup> This would likely not happen.<sup>25</sup> In November 2018, Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats disclosed that “Russia began testing the missile in the late 2000’s and by 2015 had completed a comprehensive flight test program consisting of multiple tests of the 9M729 missile from both fixed and mobile launchers.” Specifically, he asserted that “Russia initially flight tested the 9M729—a ground based missile—to distances well over 500 [km] from a fixed launcher.”<sup>26</sup> He did not offer further specifications about the actual missile. These tests presumably took place at facilities located in Kapustin Yar, a Russian launch and development site near the city of Volgograd. Slightly predating Coats’s remarks were statements by the Dutch and the German governments that supported the US position.<sup>27</sup>

Russia predictably responded that it had not tested the 9M729 to INF ranges. A war of words and presentations ensued. The United States accused Russia of trying to “obfuscate the nature of the program.”<sup>28</sup> The most serious effort at rebutting US accusations occurred in a briefing given jointly by the Russian Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs. This briefing showcased the 9M729 missile container and launcher (but not the missile itself) while emphasizing that it had a range of 480 km as opposed to the older, slightly shorter 9M728, which has a range of 490 km. No tests—at least those conducted between 2008 and 2014—exceeded the INF limit. The United States was unsatisfied with the Russian statement. Invitations to inspect the missile went unaccepted amid US doubts that they would reveal any information about its maximum range. As the State

Department website avers, “Russia has attempted to conceal the nature of the SSC-8 program by obfuscating and lying about the missile’s test history.”<sup>29</sup>

Russia has also sought to deflect blame by making counter-accusations that the United States has itself been in violation.<sup>30</sup> The main counter-accusation pertains to the US-NATO missile defense program in Europe—that is, the European Phased Adaptive Approach that has its main sites in Poland, Romania, and Spain with the full shield having its command and control in Ramstein, Germany. The Polish and Romanian sites are noteworthy because they involve ground-based AEGIS-Ashore systems that have SM-3 Block IIA and Block IIB interceptors designed to defend against medium- and intermediate-range missile threats. Russia alleges that the Aegis ashore system can be reprogrammed to launch cruise missiles like the sea-based Tomahawk and that the canisters used can fit nuclear-tipped cruise missiles.<sup>31</sup> According to the Russian view, these systems could be used to launch attacks against Russia, thereby undermining its own deterrent capabilities. As Alexey Arbatov writes, however, this program “will have very little impact on the Russian nuclear deterrence potential—both in terms of the planned number of missile interceptors and their technical characteristics.”<sup>32</sup> Some US analysts side with the Arbatov position. They argue that the limited range of the Aegis radar is useless for detecting and tracking long-range missiles.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the system depends on more than just the Aegis radar since it can draw on external sources (e.g., new X-band radar in Turkey).<sup>34</sup> Finally, Russia charges that the target missiles (using Minuteman II motors) designed to test US missile defense interceptors run afoul of the INF Treaty. This allegation has little foundation since the treaty “explicitly permits the use of older booster stages for research and development purposes, subject to specific Treaty rules. This includes their use as targets for missile defense tests.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Impetus for US Withdrawal**

In some ways Russia’s violation of the INF Treaty gave the legal pretext for the Trump administration to withdraw from the treaty to pursue a more competitive strategy vis-à-vis China.<sup>36</sup> As indicated, Trump partly justified withdrawing the United States from the INF Treaty by invoking China. In his 2019 State of the Union address, he suggested that “perhaps we can negotiate a different agreement, adding China and others.”<sup>37</sup> The geopolitical logic is straightforward. In the past 10 years, because it was not a signatory to the INF Treaty, China has been investing in ground-based intermediate-range missile systems that serve in part to create an



antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) bubble that will complicate efforts by the United States to operate within a theater of operations, let alone enter it, to defend an ally.<sup>38</sup> According to a 2013 US National Air and Space Intelligence Center report, “China has the most active and diverse ballistic missile program in the world,” with the most controversial missile being the ground-launched, nuclear-capable DH-10 missile.<sup>39</sup> This cruise missile has a range of 1,500 kilometers. Moreover, China and Russia appear to be “on the verge of an alliance” as evinced by greater military-technological cooperation and personnel exchange, increased use of regular consultations, and the greater frequency of joint military exercises.<sup>40</sup> From the perspective of the Trump administration, withdrawing from the INF Treaty accomplishes two objectives. First, it frees the United States to develop and to deploy land-based systems that can counter Chinese systems, thereby improving deterrence and strengthening alliances. Second, Russian defense planners have voiced concerns about the rise of China in the past decade. Now Russia would be free to field intermediate-range conventional and nuclear forces to shore up its deterrence measures regarding China.<sup>41</sup> Doing so could create a security dilemma whereby Beijing may feel the need to develop further capabilities so as to strengthen deterrence against Russia. By sowing distrust in Sino-Russian relations, the added pressure on Beijing in turn can relieve pressure on US allies and partners in the Western Pacific.

Some critics argue against such a strategy. They contend that US deployments of land-based intermediate-range missile systems would destabilize East Asia, encounter budgetary and technical challenges, and provide a costlier and superfluous alternative to existing systems.<sup>42</sup> These arguments can be contradictory. Budgetary and technical considerations will blunt any destabilizing effect that a supposedly dangerous and expensive system might have. For instance, if Guam is the most feasible option for deploying land-based intermediate-range missiles systems, then this vulnerability should make these weapons less dangerous to China. Indeed, Beijing might even prefer that Washington spend money on more expensive systems—assuming that they are superfluous—that may have dubious strategic value. Still, critics leave unclear as to why China’s missile superiority in the Asia-Pacific region itself is not destabilizing but US efforts to address this imbalance would be. Moves toward parity should be welcomed because they promote stability by enhancing mutual vulnerability. Moreover, air- and sea-launched systems could just as well be seen as destabilizing, especially if they are more survivable and delivered by platforms with stealth capabilities.<sup>43</sup> Why one system is less

stabilizing than the other is not necessarily obvious, especially if Chinese military and political leaders seem to have retained their faith in minimal deterrence despite opting for greater ambiguity in their country's nuclear posture.<sup>44</sup>

### **Propaganda, Arms Races, and Discord?**

Critics have voiced concerns about what the INF Treaty's demise means for international security. First, by electing to withdraw from the agreement, the Trump administration handed Moscow a major propaganda victory. Second, with the INF Treaty gone, an unfettered nuclear arms race would ensue whereby both sides would try to deploy as many of the once-banned missiles as they can in Europe. Third, terminating the treaty would undermine cohesion within US alliances. These concerns are overstated.

#### ***A Propaganda Victory?***

Arms control advocates charge that withdrawing from the INF Treaty rewards Russian noncompliance with a propaganda victory. Moscow can now blame Washington for the demise of the INF Treaty.<sup>45</sup> The reasoning here is specious. For one, the identity of the audience impressed by this supposed propaganda victory is never clear. US citizens tend to have stylized views on foreign policy and so in general would not appreciate the technical details surrounding the improper use of the 9M729 missile. The same could be said for most publics abroad. The Kremlin would have created a favorable narrative for Russian citizens regardless of US actions. Allied decision makers in Europe might be the audience, but they also have their own intelligence services to assess competing claims about INF Treaty violations in their own right. Indeed, NATO has unanimously expressed its support for the US position. For another, this argument implicitly assumes that the propaganda victory borne by the US withdrawal outweighs the record of Russian noncompliance that triggered the withdrawal in the first place. In the days after the United States submitted its official notice for withdrawal, Russian minister of defense Sergei Shoigu signaled his country's intent to create new land-based missiles in the next two years. The short timeline suggests that it has already been developing what would have been noncompliant missiles.<sup>46</sup> International audiences observe not only the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty but also Russian behavior more generally.

### ***Alliance Fragmentation?***

Another critique is that the INF Treaty would intensify the ongoing crisis in transatlantic relations at a time when Trump has called into question the contemporary relevance of NATO and sharply rebuked some of its members for not doing enough to contribute to the common defense burden.<sup>47</sup> This fear has not yet been borne out. Although some arms control advocates might not find the case made by the United States for pulling out persuasive, the fact remains that NATO has so far shown unanimity on this issue. The reason is simple: Russia is guilty of violating the treaty while trying to undermine European security through various activities like disinformation campaigns, political meddling, nuclear signaling, and the war in Ukraine.<sup>48</sup>

A deeper version of this critique raises the possibility that Russia may be trying to decouple some European allies not from the United States but from other European allies.<sup>49</sup> By facing the prospects of nuclear retaliation, they might be less inclined to abide by Article 5 commitments and to support allies located on Russia's borders. This danger is real. However, one must not overstate the newness of this problem. Precisely because they were already geographically removed from the Baltic region, some European allies do not share the threat assessments of Poland and the Baltic countries with respect to Russia. Indeed, France and Great Britain failed to respond meaningfully to Nazi (and Soviet) aggression against Poland—a treaty ally for each of them—when nuclear weapons did not yet exist. The intramural debates over European Union sanctions typify the major differences of opinion that abound among member states over how to confront Russia. Disagreements exist even over the desirability and effectiveness of nuclear deterrence in Europe.<sup>50</sup> One reason why, for example, Polish leaders prefer to work with the United States is because they somewhat distrust their Western European counterparts.<sup>51</sup> Intra-European decoupling might widen with Russian INF forces, but the problem has long existed.

The alliance-centered critique of the INF withdrawal thus assumes that fragmentation will be less intense if the Trump administration chooses to stick with the agreement. Yet, as Michael Kofman notes, “if only one party is complying with the deal, then it ceases to be an instrument of arms control and becomes a unilateral act of self-restraint.”<sup>52</sup> Even more than disrupting the fiction of arms control, maintaining appearances might rattle those allies most worried about the Russian threat. They might believe that the United States will allow Russia to covertly build up its

capabilities and to act with impunity simply to uphold a US commitment to agreements.

### ***An Arms Race?***

The most significant criticism of the withdrawal decision warns that this move would lead to an unfettered arms race between the United States and Russia.<sup>53</sup> Some observers even add that Russia has a head start thanks again to its record of noncompliance—a fear that Russia seems to have already validated by proclaiming its intent to introduce new land-based missiles in the near term.

How likely is it that a nuclear arms race might break out? Certainly, nuclear-weapon states have begun making adjustments to their arsenals in the last decade. China has upgraded its nuclear forces to make them more mobile and thus more survivable as a retaliatory force.<sup>54</sup> Great Britain and France have each embarked upon replacing their current fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic submarines.<sup>55</sup> In the context of the US-Russian relationship, Austin Long observes that “Russia is also expanding its arsenal to include new systems [such as the SS-8],” whereas “US nuclear modernization concentrates on replacement, rather than expansion.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as some have observed, Russia “has continued or stepped up a number of worrisome nuclear policies already in place before the [2013–14] Euro-aidan protests in Ukraine.”<sup>57</sup> The real question is whether the end of the INF Treaty represents an inflection point in how nuclear-weapon states like Russia and the United States will go about their nuclear acquisition efforts moving forward. The review of Cold War history earlier suggests that it would not be.

Recall that US and NATO defense planners leaned on nuclear deterrence to prevent even conventional military aggression by numerically superior Warsaw Pact forces in Central Europe. The United States built up impressive stockpiles of strategic nuclear weapons to survive a massive bolt-out-of-the-blue Soviet strike—a fear encouraged by talk of bomber and missile gaps.<sup>58</sup> In Europe, the United States introduced a suite of tactical nuclear weapons that would help disrupt, if not defeat, any large-scale Soviet military assault and thus dispel allies’ concerns. In other words, theories of war precipitated the massive Cold War development and deployment of nuclear forces. However, they do not have much relevance for the contemporary environment.

### ***Current Theater Context***

Such theories of war do not make sense in the context of the current European theater. To begin with, NATO's frontier shifted further east with the incorporation of the Baltic States and former Warsaw Pact countries like Poland. Russia has a robust military presence in Kaliningrad, which many analysts argue could be exploited to isolate in-theater NATO forces or to cut off additional NATO forces from providing assistance to the Baltic States in the highly unlikely event of a large-scale invasion.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Belarus and Ukraine add a new geographical buffer. Although Belarus has a formal military alliance with Russia, its leaders have pushed back against the Kremlin's efforts to strengthen Moscow's defense ties. The Russian military presence on Belarusian territory is limited mostly to facilities and airfields that can hardly be called bases. Moscow cannot assert its own preferences on Minsk without imposing costs, not least because the latter may fear being dragged into the former's disputes with NATO countries. Any significant, unforeseen buildup of Russian forces would likely be detectable, thus giving early warning to potential Russian belligerence.<sup>60</sup> Ukraine is already fighting an armed conflict with Russia, albeit through proxy forces that likely would have been defeated if they had not received major transfers of heavy equipment and other forms of support. Notwithstanding recent flare-ups in the Sea of Azov area, the "frozen conflict" that persists in the Donbas suggests that Russia is either unwilling or unable to escalate to annex that territory as it did with Crimea in early 2014. In fact, with the demise of the INF Treaty, Ukraine will also be free to invest in its missile capabilities. Doing so would also add pressure on Russia and enhance US leverage against it.<sup>61</sup>

The Baltic countries, and Poland to a lesser extent, are the most vulnerable to Russian military aggression. A 2016 RAND report drew on war games to determine that Russian armed forces could take Riga and Tallinn within 72 hours. This assessment overstates the ease with which Russia could conquer Baltic territory through kinetic operations. For example, the modernization of its military has been uneven, its logistical supply networks remain underdeveloped, and any advanced preparatory buildup would lack the element of surprise. Closing the so-called Suwałki Gap—the singular land bridge between Poland and Lithuania connecting the Baltic countries with the rest of European NATO—would invite an escalatory response from NATO whereby any military forces staged in Kaliningrad and Belarus could be at risk. Such a large-scale assault on these NATO countries is highly unlikely even by admission of many local defense planners.<sup>62</sup> The most likely threat is subconventional, especially in

Estonia and Latvia where about a quarter of their national populations are Russian speaking. Finally, as Ulrich Kühn and Anna Péczeli observe, “even if Russia were to deploy a limited number of INF systems . . . such a deployment would not immediately alter the overall military balance between NATO and Russia.”<sup>63</sup> NATO will retain its conventional military superiority, whereas Russia’s basic hold on local escalation dominance will persist. More bluntly, Poland and the Baltic countries have already been living within range of nuclear-capable missiles.

The northeastern flank hardly resembles the Cold War’s Central Front. Does that mean nuclear weapons have no role whatsoever? No. One reason why Russia may be resorting to subconventional or so-called hybrid actions against the Baltic countries is concern about the consequences of any large-scale military aggression against them.<sup>64</sup> An overt attack would trigger Article 5, which could set in motion escalatory dynamics that may be hard for any one side to contain. Some allege that Russia has a war-winning nuclear doctrine envisioning the use of nuclear weapons to de-escalate even those conflicts that it has started.<sup>65</sup> If true, this strategic problem exists regardless of whether the INF Treaty remains in force. Some observers are skeptical of such assessments: “escalate to de-escalate” is either far too risky to be true or much more defensive than typically portrayed.<sup>66</sup> At minimum, not unlike NATO’s flexible response in the Cold War, Russia’s nuclear doctrine does not foresee unilateral disarmament and the voluntary surrender to another great power in a major war. In sum, nuclear weapons will be useful largely for deterring a major military action rather than for compelling favorable results should deterrence fail.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, any prospective arms race in Europe would have to overcome budgetary barriers. According to the 2017 Congressional Budget Office report, “the plans for nuclear forces delineated in the Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) and the Department of Energy’s (DOE’s) budget requests for fiscal year 2017 would cost a total of \$400 billion over the 2017–2026 period.”<sup>68</sup> Considering that the Republican Party has lost control of the House in the 2018 midterms and that Democrats wish to curb the defense budget in light of the growing deficit spending, the Trump administration may be hard-pressed to find money for new INF systems. This constraint will also exist for Russia despite it having a head start in developing and deploying such systems. As Pavel Podvig observes, notwithstanding the availability of internal funds for flight tests and advanced demonstrations, “the State Armament Program for 2018–2027, which was approved at the end of 2017 after a more than 2-year delay caused by the uncertain economic situation, did not include a number of projects

that were initiated by the industry and supported by the military.”<sup>69</sup> To be sure, as Kofman counsels, the Russian defense budget—substantial as it is—has seen only modest cuts.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, building up ground-based cruise missiles and launchers in East Central Europe when Russia already has an A2/AD bubble in Kaliningrad will have to compete with other defense priorities, which include the war against Ukraine, the intervention in Syria, military infrastructure, and even domestic security services.


### **Conclusion: Arms Control Is Not an End but a Means**

The arguments put forward against withdrawing from the INF Treaty are thus unconvincing. And indeed, it is worth recalling how, just before the INF Treaty was negotiated, Thomas Schelling penned an essay entitled “What Went Wrong with Arms Control?” in which he argued that advocates lost sight of the key features of weapons that could make them destabilizing. Specifically, he warned against the preoccupation with numbers “categories [that] relate to things like land, sea and air [rather than] strategic characteristics like susceptibility to preemption or capability for preemption, [or] even relevant ingredients like warheads per target point, readiness, speed of delivery, accuracy or recallability after launch.”<sup>71</sup> Schelling believed that one key feature important for strategic stability concerned mutual vulnerability: that is, no one side should have an ability to carry out a disarming first strike. To be sure, this notion of strategic stability is problematic. Pentagon decision makers have typically been uncomfortable with the vulnerability it entailed, whereas the Kremlin generally does not understand strategic stability as a function of capabilities. Nevertheless, mutual vulnerability will likely persist despite the INF Treaty and global nuclear modernization efforts. Despite investments in counterforce capabilities and missile defense, the United States will not be able to launch a disarming first strike against improved Russian nuclear capabilities. For its part, Russia appears more interested in “ensuring guaranteed retaliation” than gathering the capabilities necessary for “a successful counterforce attack” or “a damage limitation strategy.”<sup>72</sup> Even if the United States were to close capability gaps vis-à-vis Russia’s nuclear posture, as some suggest, mutual vulnerability will remain.<sup>73</sup> Arms control advocates have neglected this enduring feature of the military balance.

By suspending its obligations under the INF Treaty, the Trump administration signaled that it would not engage in arms control initiatives for their own sake and that sometimes those initiatives are misaligned with the ends they purport to seek. Consider the 2018 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*. Recognizing Russia (and China) as strategic competitors, the

2018 *NDS* emphasizes deterrence but acknowledges that it does not emerge automatically. A *competitive strategy* must be vigorously pursued over the long term to shape the choices of adversaries in a favorable direction. As such, the *NDS* avers that “we [the United States] will challenge competitors by maneuvering them into unfavorable positions, frustrating their efforts, precluding their options while expanding our own, and forcing them to confront conflict under adverse conditions.”<sup>74</sup> This strategy might still accept a degree of mutual vulnerability, but it may seek to tip the balance further against Russia and China in a manner that improves the military balance in favor of the United States and its partners. These benefits may not materialize, thereby obliging the Trump administration to work in concert with allies in Europe and Asia to hold Russia accountable for its violation of the arms control agreement and to contain the missile threats posed by Russia and China.

Although the United States has no plans for deploying previously banned missiles and launchers in Europe, as the Trump administration has maintained to date, withdrawing from the INF Treaty may pay important dividends for US national security interests. First, it signals to Russia that treaties will not be upheld unilaterally if it violates them and that noncompliance creates reputation costs. Sending this signal can possibly foster alliance solidarity, as evinced by NATO’s response to the withdrawal thus far. Second, suspending its treaty obligations allows the United States and its allies greater flexibility toward Russia and China if in the future they feel that ground-based systems do offer an advantage that they wish to exploit. That interest may not exist now, but the threat of such deployments could deter revisionism against US or allied interests.<sup>75</sup> Third, if Russia decides to continue with developing intermediate-range forces, then that could provoke a response from its neighbors. Specifically, China might be wary of Russian intentions and could put the brakes on their growing strategic alignment. Ukraine could also develop cruise missiles that hold Moscow at risk, thereby strengthening deterrence and dampening any incentive Russia might have for escalating in the Donbas region.

Any propaganda benefits the Kremlin may enjoy will be outweighed by the backlash to its own aggressive behavior. As for discord, NATO has so far been united behind the US decision to abrogate. While an arms buildup is underway, international, budgetary, and other constraints will keep it from intensifying. These benefits outweigh the costs associated with pulling out of the INF Treaty. 



## Notes

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