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A Russian View of the U.S. INF Withdrawal

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INF Background

The 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 (INF Treaty) was signed in Washington, D.C., on December 8, 1987 by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary of the governing Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev. The agreement, of indefinite duration, entered into force on June 1, 1988.

The parties to the treaty undertook to eliminate in three years all their ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles of intermediate (1,000-5,500 kilometers) and shorter (500-1,000 kilometers) range; to not have, produce, or test any such missiles; and to not produce launchers for such missiles in the future. To verify the implementation of the treaty and resolve issues of concern that might arise during its implementation, the parties established a Special Verification Commission (SVC) and a verification system providing for up to ten annual on-site inspections for 13 years after the treaty entered into force, and ongoing inspections to verify the production of mobile ballistic missiles at the Hercules Plant No 1 in Magna, Utah, and at the Votkinsk Engineering Plant in Udmurtia, USSR.

The INF Treaty became the first ever international agreement on nuclear disarmament. The weapon elimination was completed in May 1991. The Soviet Union destroyed a total of 1,846 missiles, and the United States destroyed 846 missiles.¹ Also, the entire infrastructure associated with those missiles was eliminated, namely: launchers, launch facilities, vehicles, auxiliary equipment, and other equipment that were located at 109 facilities in the USSR, six facilities in the GDR and one facility in Czechoslovakia, as well as at 32 American facilities located both in the United States and in five European NATO members—Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and the Netherlands.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, and Russia was accepted by the international community as its legal successor, newly independent Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine agreed to accede to the INF Treaty since they hosted sites which previously housed ballistic intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based missiles, and these facilities were subject to monitoring by U.S. inspectors. At the 1992 Lisbon summit, the heads of five states—the United States, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine—all signed a protocol on the expansion of the membership of the INF Treaty².

In May 2001, the inspection activities under the INF Treaty were completed and, since then, the compliance of the parties has been monitored through national technical means of verification, mainly reconnaissance space vehicles. In 2003, the activities of the SVC were discontinued.

¹ The USSR destroyed 809 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (149 R-12/SS-4, 6 R-14/SS-5, 654 RSD-10/SS-20), 957 shorter-range ballistic missiles (718 OTR-22/SS-22, 239 OTR-23/SS-23), and 80 RK-55/SS-N-21 cruise missiles. The USA destroyed 234 Pershing-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles, 169 Pershing-1A shorter-range ballistic missiles, and 443 BGM-109G cruise missiles.

² This document, which is widely known as the Lisbon Protocol, became an integral part of the INF Treaty after ratification by all signatory countries. The process of ratification was completed in 1994.

In addition to the tangible reductions in nuclear weapons, the INF Treaty demonstrated the pragmatic approach Moscow and Washington were willing to take to get out of an increasingly explosive situation of growing nuclear confrontation in Europe between the two superpowers. The eliminations also normalized the military-political situation on the European continent, and also globally.

The stabilizing role of the INF Treaty is still relevant. Its importance has even increased against the background of the sharp deterioration of relations between Russia and the West in recent years due to the well-known events in Ukraine, aggravated by mutual sanctions and NATO's military build-up near Russian borders. Preserving the INF Treaty, which has now become the subject of controversy and mutual non-compliance accusations between Russia and the United States, is therefore doubly important.

Accusations of non-compliance

The Russian side accuses the United States of: 1) using Hera, LRALT, and MRT ballistic target missiles, which are similar to the ballistic missiles prohibited by the INF Treaty, for testing ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems; 2) developing and deploying Predator and Reaper combat unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) with a range of over 500 kilometers, which fall under the definition of a cruise missile in the INF Treaty,³ and therefore should be banned; 3) deploying in Romania an Aegis Ashore BMD system with Mk-41 universal launchers capable of launching not only Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptors but also Tomahawk attack cruise missiles with a range of 2,500 kilometers, which is a direct violation of the INF Treaty.⁴

U.S. officials consider these Russian claims untenable and, in turn, accuse it of developing, testing, and deploying a new SSC-8 (Russian designation – 9M729) ground-based cruise missile, which allegedly has a range of over 500 kilometers. Russia has confirmed the existence of this missile, but denies that its technical characteristics violate the INF Treaty.⁵

A high-level U.S.-Russian dialogue on resolving mutual concerns regarding INF Treaty compliance was formed in 2014, but it has not yet yielded results. The SVC was reconvened in late 2016 to help resolve these concerns, but it did not help either, since its format did not envisage regular exchanges between U.S. and Russian technical experts on the controversial issues related to the implementation of the INF Treaty and on acceptable compromises.

When President Donald Trump took office in early 2017, the accusations against Russia intensified, and Washington threatened the use of sanctions. U.S. officials simultaneously

³ According to the INF Treaty (Art. II, Para. 2) a cruise missile is ‘unmanned, self-propelled vehicle that sustains flight through the use of aerodynamic lift over most of its flight path.’

⁴ By 2020, a similar Aegis Ashore BMD system will be deployed in Poland.

⁵ In order to demonstrate that the SSC-8 cruise missile does not violate the INF Treaty, Russia provided the US with full information on when and at what distance the missile had been tested. Russia was able to do this after in late 2017 it became clear that the missile the US had been accusing of violating the INF Treaty since 2014 was SSC-8 cruise missile. Before that moment, Washington refused to specify the type of the Russian cruise missile violating the INF Treaty, citing the fear of disclosing a source of information.

rejected Russia's argument that it hasn't violated the treaty and that the United States is non-compliant. With the appointment of John Bolton⁶ as the national security advisor to the president in the summer of 2018, the White House began to entertain the idea of withdrawing the United States from the INF Treaty on the pretext that Russia was in violation of the treaty.

The U.S. decision to withdrawal

A factor in this decision was deep-seated concern about missile capabilities in China, which, unlike Russia and the United States, does not have international obligations preventing it from the development and deployment of intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles. China is rapidly building up its arsenal of such weapons. The People's Liberation Army's missile forces have DF-11, DF-15, and DF-16 shorter-range ballistic missiles, several modifications of DF-21 medium-range ballistic missiles, and DF-26, as well as DH-10 cruise missiles, with a range of more than 1,500 kilometers. These missiles can carry both nuclear and conventional warheads. According to the 2018 annual Pentagon report to the U.S. Congress, the Chinese missile forces had 250-300 launchers with 1,000-1,200 shorter-range missiles and 100-150 launchers with 330 medium-range missiles (up to 30 missiles with a range of 3,000-5,400 kilometers and about 300 missiles with a range of 1,500-3,000 kilometers). According to the Pentagon, this arsenal undermines the security not only of Taiwan, but also of U.S. bases and naval forces in the western Pacific Ocean, especially since China is becoming more militant and politically assertive, for instance in the South China Sea.

The United States says it cannot accept such a state of affairs. Washington sees China's missile capabilities as its own military weakness and therefore strives to develop intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. In order to withdraw from the INF Treaty and at the same time preserve its reputation as an adherent to international obligations, however, the U.S. administration needs a rationale, such as Russia's alleged violation of the treaty.

In view of the above, President Trump's declaration on October 20, 2018, of intention to withdraw the United States from the INF Treaty did not surprise Russia.⁷ A few days before the announcement, Washington, through its embassy in Moscow, handed over to the Russian Foreign Ministry a detailed list of questions about alleged Russian non-compliance with the INF Treaty.⁸ But after Trump's announcement, the Americans argued that "questionnaire or no questionnaire but they were withdrawing from the INF Treaty."

⁶ John Bolton has long been a fundamental opponent of US involvement in any international agreements that restrict Washington's ability to increase its military power. Back in 2011, he publicly expressed a negative attitude towards the INF Treaty in an article published in The Wall Street Journal.

⁷ In particular, this was confirmed by Russian President Vladimir Putin during a press conference held on October 24, 2018 following his meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conti. Answering a question from a media representative about the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, he explained that the US made the decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty well before but only recently announced it.

⁸ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent this questionnaire to the Russian Ministry of Defense and other agencies that were to study the US claims and prepare answers to them.

To explain U.S. reasoning behind the withdrawal from the INF Treaty, Bolton went to Moscow. On October 22-23, 2018, he held meetings with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and Russian President Vladimir Putin. During these meetings, Bolton confirmed the U.S. intention to withdraw from the treaty, explaining that the United States was confronting a “new strategic reality.” He pointed out that there were a number of states such as China, Iran, and North Korea that did not participate in the INF Treaty and have the capability to use intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based missile systems. Bolton also once again accused Russia of violating the INF Treaty and rejecting Moscow’s claims that the United States was in violation of the treaty.

On October 28, 2018, Sergei Lavrov, in an interview on the “Moscow. Kremlin. Putin” program on Russia-1 TV channel noted that during the meeting between Putin and Bolton, the issue of the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty was discussed calmly and that “the Russian president was very clear that we understood that this was the United States’ decision and that we could not influence this decision.”

The European Union, and Germany and France in particular, unanimously opposed Trump’s decision on the INF Treaty. The spokesperson for EU Foreign Minister Federica Mogherini said: “The INF Treaty contributed to the end of the Cold War and constitutes a pillar of European security architecture. . . . The world does not need a new arms race that would benefit no one and on the contrary would bring even more instability.” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg added: “We do not want a new cold war. . . . We do not want a new arms race.” German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, in an interview with Funke, said that he turned to NATO to preserve the INF Treaty, since the treaty affected the vital interests of Europe. French officials also warned in similar terms about the “hasty unilateral decisions of the U.S. president regarding the INF Treaty.”

After witnessing this reaction from Europe, Russia took further steps to preserve the INF Treaty. It submitted a draft resolution in support of the treaty to the UN Secretariat and the chairperson of the UN General Assembly First Committee. However, on October 26, 2018, the First Committee refused to consider the draft resolution by a majority of votes under the pretext that Russia failed the deadline for submitting such documents. Russia then submitted the draft resolution to preserve the INF Treaty to the UN General Assembly. On December 21, 2018, the assembly rejected the draft resolution: 43 countries voted for its adoption, 46 countries voted against, and 78 countries abstained—presumably because the United States twisted the arms of its allies and partners.

On December 4, 2018, even before the vote in the UN General Assembly, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered an ultimatum in which he demanded that Russia stop violating the INF Treaty and destroy the SSC-8 cruise missiles, otherwise the United States would suspend its obligations under the treaty within 60 days (that is, on February 2, 2019) and would start the six-month period before its full withdrawal. Though it took the statement negatively, Moscow did not give in to emotions and, instead, suggested that the two countries continue consultations with the goal of preserving the treaty.

On January 15, 2019, closed-to-the-public U.S.-Russian consultations on the fate of the INF Treaty were held in Geneva. The Russian delegation was headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov; the U.S. one by Under Secretary of State Andrea Thompson. Both parties were dissatisfied with the outcome of the 2-hour meeting and stated that “no progress was made.” The United States continued to insist that Russia had to destroy the SSC-8 cruise missiles and categorically rejected all Russian claims about Washington’s treaty violations. Russia urged the United States to abandon the “language of ultimatums” and talk about specific measures to preserve the INF Treaty. In particular, Russia offered to hold a briefing with a demonstration of an SSC-8 cruise missile and its transporter-launcher for U.S. experts in exchange for transparency measures regarding the U.S. Aegis ashore BMD system deployed in Romania and other weapon systems that were the subject of Russian concerns. The United States rejected the Russian initiative, refusing even to consider the merits of the proposal.

Following the Geneva meeting, Sergei Ryabkov told reporters: “After this contact in Geneva, we clearly see Washington’s ambition to go all the way in its intention to destroy this agreement.” In turn, Andrea Thompson, in an interview with Elena Chernenko from the Russian newspaper Kommersant, said: “We have given Russia 60 days, and the clock is still ticking. Until February 2, Russia still has a chance to return to the compliance with the INF Treaty.”

Since the United States did not give Russia the opportunity to prove, in a bilateral format, that it had not violated the INF Treaty, Moscow decided to invite military experts from all interested countries to a public briefing about the missiles at the heart of U.S. concerns. On January 23, 2019, the Russian Ministry of Defense voluntarily held a special briefing for foreign military attaches on the Iskander-M mobile tactical missile complex with SSC-7 (9M728 or R-500) and SSC-8 cruise missiles. The briefing took place in the Congress and Exhibition Center of the “Patriot” Military-Patriotic Culture and Recreation Park of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Representatives of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, BRICS, the EU, and NATO, as well as some European and Asian countries were invited to participate in the event. But the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany, as well as EU and NATO leaders ignored the briefing, which was covered by about 250 journalists, including over 100 representatives of foreign media.

The participants were shown a SSC-8 cruise missile mounted on a stand and presented with data on its design and performance characteristics. Also, a transporter-launcher for SSC-8s and launch tubes for SSC-7 and SSC-8 missiles were displayed in the showroom. Lieutenant-General Mikhail Matveyevsky, head of Russia’s Missile Troops and Artillery, who represented the Russian military at the briefing, spoke about the differences between SSC-7⁹ and SSC-8 cruise missiles and their transporter-launchers.

He pointed out that SSC-7 and SSC-8 cruise missiles had the same main units, but that the latter had a warhead of increased power and a modernized onboard control complex which offered higher accuracy when engaging a target. While the diameter of the missile remained the same,

⁹ The United States does not claim that SSC-7 cruise missile violates the provisions of the INF Treaty.

the above changes led to an increase in the length and size of the launch tube (its total length increased by 53 centimeters). The mass of the SSC-8 also increased, but the starting and main engines and fuel system remained unchanged, and the volume (mass) of fuel in the missile remained the same as in the SSC-7.¹⁰ As a result, the maximum range of the SSC-8 missile is 480 kilometers—10 kilometers less than the SSC-7. This was confirmed during “Zapad-2017” strategic tabletop exercise conducted by the Russian Armed Forces in the summer of 2017.

Due to their extended length, the SSC-8 and its launch tube do not fit the transporter-launcher designed for SSC-7 missile. Therefore, the SSC-8 has its own special version of the transporter-launcher that can carry four missiles (the transporter-launcher for the SSC-7 can fit only two missiles). The length and height of this new transporter-launcher are greater than the version for the SSC-7.

The information presented at the briefing was sufficient for an unbiased military expert to conclude that the SSC-8 cruise missile did not fall under the scope of the INF Treaty. However, the presentation failed to change the U.S. position on the SSC-8. Andrea Kalan, a spokesperson at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow said, “Russia’s demonstration of what they claimed was the 9M729 missile did not change anybody’s conclusion that the system is a violation of the INF Treaty.” In view of the above, there is little doubt that the United States will fully withdraw from the treaty and put the blame on Russia.

What will be the consequences if the INF Treaty sinks into oblivion?

First. The nuclear arms control regime underlying Russian-U.S. relations will be significantly undermined, since it will no longer include constraints on intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based missile systems. This could lead to a halt and even a reversal of bilateral nuclear disarmament efforts between the countries.

Second. After withdrawing from the INF Treaty, the United States could begin to develop and deploy intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based missile systems. This would trigger a response not only from Russia, but also from China, as well as from other countries that would have security concerns in connection with the nuclear build-up of the United States, Russia, and China. This would jeopardize the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and its collapse, if it happens, would entail global nuclear chaos and undermine global strategic stability.

Third. If the United States deployed its intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based missiles in Europe near Russian borders, e.g., in the Baltic states, this would fundamentally change the state of the Russian military security. These missiles could be capable of delivering a preventive nuclear missile strike in one to four minutes which would strip Russia of its ability to respond within its current nuclear doctrine, which relies on a retaliatory nuclear capability. In this scenario, Russia would have to resort to a significantly weaker retaliatory nuclear missile strike,

¹⁰ SSC-7 and SSC-8 cruise missiles can be equipped with warhead and fueled only in factory conditions. The mass of fuel provides the maximum design range limited by provisions of the INF Treaty. These missiles are delivered to the troops in special containers (tubes) making changing the mass of fuel or refueling impossible.

which would be unlikely to sit well with the military-political leadership of Russia. Moscow would be forced to amend its nuclear doctrine by including the possibility of launching a preemptive nuclear-missile strike against an aggressor preparing to attack Russia.

If these steps occur, the military tension between the United States and Russia would escalate to a level even worse than the one of the early and mid-1980s, before the INF Treaty. The risks of inadvertent or accidental nuclear war would increase immeasurably.

Minimizing the damage

Since the international community failed to come together to preserve the INF Treaty (as witnessed by the results of the December 2018 vote in the UN General Assembly on the Russian draft resolution in support of the INF Treaty), it is vitally important to do everything possible to minimize the negative consequences of the treaty's collapse, which would increase the risk of nuclear war. This would foremost require preventing the United States from deploying intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based missile systems in Europe.

Moscow could assist this goal by announcing a moratorium on the deployment of intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based missile systems in the European part of Russia unless the United States starts to deploy such missiles in Europe. Moscow could also propose to the United States to make bilateral political commitments not to deploy the missiles in question "from the Atlantic to the Urals." Ideally these commitments would be legally binding, but the current U.S. administration is unlikely to agree to this.

As for the Pacific region, the United States and Russia should exercise restraint when deploying intermediate- and shorter-range ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles, so as not to bring confrontation there to a new level of acrimony.

About the Author

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