



THE BREWING US-RUSSIA NUCLEAR ARMS RACE: AN ASSESSMENT

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US and Russia relations have deteriorated over the last few year. These tensions in relations between the two great powers have been accompanied by a breakdown in bilateral arms control regime. This, in turn, is threatening to reignite a new arms race between the two countries.

The most recent development in this chain of events is the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The Trump administration has accused Russia of developing a missile that violates the treaty. Russia has counter accusations against the US. The US had given Russia an ultimatum that it will withdraw from this landmark treaty that helped protect Europe from the danger of small and medium range ballistic missiles. The START treaty is also about to expire in 2021 and there are no signs that the two sides are going to extend the treaty. The breakdown in arms control comes as the US is planning to develop new nuclear weapons. Through its Nuclear Posture Review in 2018, the US has made it clear that it is going to develop a whole new range of nuclear weapons. US plans could push other countries like China and Russia to modernize their nuclear arsenals. This is setting off a new arms race that would bring more global instability.

The INF was signed in 1987 between US and Soviet Union to keep ground-based nuclear weapons out of Europe. It prohibited the manufacture and deployment of missiles with ranges of 500 km to 5500 km. It led the two superpowers to remove thousands of nuclear missiles pointed at each other. As a result of the INF, the Soviet Union eliminated 1846 missiles, while the US 846.¹ For decades, it was the cornerstone of European security. However, since 2014, the US has been accusing Russia of violating the treaty. The missile in question is the ground-launched cruise missile Novator 9M729. In

¹ Amy Woolf, "U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty," CRS Insight, Updated February 1, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/IN10985.pdf>

2017, the US Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats said that Russia has "fielded multiple battalions of 9M729 missiles, which pose a direct conventional and nuclear threat against most of Europe and parts of Asia."² Russia also accuses the US of violating the treaty by fielding the missile defence interceptors in Eastern Europe that it alleges can be converted for offensive purposes by making minor software changes. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a formal ultimatum on December 4, 2018 saying that Russia has 60 days to return to full and verifiable compliance or the US would withdraw from the treaty. Russia has offered dialogue over the matter and raised the prospect of mutual inspections, but has not received a positive response. Russia even introduced a resolution for the preservation of the INF in the General Assembly, but it could not be adopted due to lack of majority votes in its favour.³ Russian officials have gone so far as to say that the US is not interested in negotiations over the matter.

The US has cited China as one of the reasons why the INF is no longer viable for the US. Mr Pompeo declared in December 2018 that : "There is no reason the United States should continue to cede this crucial military advantage to revisionist powers like China, in particular when these weapons are being used to threaten and coerce the United States and its allies in Asia."⁴ This also suggests that the US would have withdrawn from the treaty even if the issue of compliance was resolved. The US finally announced withdrawal from the treaty on December 2. A day later, Russia also announced that it will also suspend treaty obligations. Russian President said that the country will start work on creating new missiles including hypersonic ones and won't initiate disarmament talks with Washington.⁵ He also said that Russia would not deploy weapons in Europe unless the US does. This could, in essence, spell the beginning of an unchecked arms race that would remind us of the Cold War era. The demise of the INF would be disastrous for European and international security.

The INF withdrawal would also affect another key US-Russia arms control treaty, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) signed between US and Russia in April 2010. It limits the deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombs to 1,550. It limits the number of deployed missiles and bombers at 700, and the total number of deployed and non-deployed launchers to 800. Under this treaty, both US and Russia eliminated thousands of nuclear warheads and launchers. The Treaty

² "After the INF What is Next? *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2019.

³ General Assembly Rejects Resolution Calling for Strengthening Russian-United States Compliance with Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, GA/12116, December 21, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/ga12116.doc.htm>

⁴ Connor Finnegan, "Pompeo says US suspending landmark nuclear deal because of Russian violations," *ABC News*, December 4, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/pompeo-us-suspending-landmark-nuclear-deal-russian-violations/story?id=59602417>

⁵ Putin says Russia also suspending key nuclear arms treaty after U.S. move to withdraw, *NBC News*, February 2, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/putin-says-russia-also-suspending-key-nuclear-arms-treaty-response-n966146>

would expire in February 2021 with the provision to extend it for a further five years. However, the ripple effects of the collapse of INF would also engulf the New START, and could mean the end of this treaty as well. The bad blood created as a result of the INF demise and a general disdain in the US regarding arms control treaties and any measures that restrain its weapons development plans means that it is unlikely that the New START would be extended beyond 2021. The US has so far not taken up any offers to discuss extension of the treaty. Once the New START expires, it would be the end of bilateral arms control that has provided a check on unrestrained arms development for decades. The collapse of the arms control structure will indeed be very bad news.

The breakdown in US-Russia bilateral arms control would have ripple effects on the global arms control architecture especially on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It would further weaken the NPT. It is already under pressure since many non-nuclear countries have put forward a treaty to ban all nuclear weapons in 2017. Moreover, by abandoning arms control and developing new nuclear weapons, both Russia and the US have gone against their disarmament commitments under Article VI of the NPT.⁶ Article VI of the NPT requires state parties to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."⁷ However, the US and Russia are embarking on a new nuclear arms race.

The US has revealed its extensive nuclear weapons development plans in its Nuclear Posture Review of 2018. This would include new intercontinental ballistic missiles, new long-range bombers, and ballistic missile submarines as well and new tactical nuclear weapons.⁸ The latter were deemed dangerous by both US and Soviet Union during the Cold War and they eventually agreed to eliminate these. The US plans to rebuild its nuclear arsenal are estimated at 1.7 trillion over the next thirty years.⁹

In turn, Russia has also laid out plans for an array of new nuclear weapons in March 2018. Speaking in a state-of-the-nation speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the weapons include a nuclear-powered cruise missile, a nuclear-powered underwater drone and new hypersonic missile that

⁶ Ulrich Kuhn, "The New Arms Race and Its Consequences," *Carnegie Endowment*, December 13, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/12/13/new-arms-race-and-its-consequences-pub-77957>

⁷ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text/>

⁸ "Nuclear Posture Review 2018," US Department of Defence, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/SpecialReports/2018NuclearPostureReview.aspx>

⁹ "U.S. Nuclear Modernization Programs," *Arms Control Association*, Fact Sheet, August 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/USNuclearModernization>

cannot be intercepted by any missile defence system and have no equivalent elsewhere in the world.¹⁰

The brewing new arms race bodes ill for the two great powers, as well as for the international security. The INF withdrawal leaves the US free to develop and deploy ground based medium intermediate range ballistic missiles. If the US ends up placing intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Japan, Guam or the southern Philippines, it would heighten China's threat perception. China would also try to develop and deploy counter weapons of its own. It also leaves Russia to develop medium and intermediate range missiles. With both the great powers developing new nuclear weapons, an arms race is likely to ensue. With China reacting to arms increase by the US and Russia, other countries like North Korea may also follow suit. The development of INF prohibited missiles will compromise the security of Europe. Many European states would react in some way or take measures to secure themselves.

Abolishing the existing arms control structure and going for whole range of nuclear weapons opens a Pandora's box of issues and problems that the US and Russia, Europe and the world are ill-prepared for. The great powers need to make a concerted effort to salvage the arms control architecture. US and Russia can try and save the New START treaty by extending it beyond 2021. The European and NATO countries need to exert influence in saving the remaining arms control treaties and perhaps come up with imaginative new arms control proposals that brings into its fold major nuclear states like US, Russia and China. There is a need to control and mitigate the ongoing arms race, otherwise, the world is going to be facing unprecedented strategic competition and instability.

¹⁰ "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>