The INF Treaty: European Perspectives on the Impending U.S. Withdrawal

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U.S. President Donald Trump’s announcement on October 20 that he intends to have the United States “terminate” the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty took many European policymakers and security experts by surprise.

Although European NATO allies now agree with the United States on the alleged Russian material breach of the treaty, the unilateral U.S. withdrawal threat is divisive within NATO. A technical solution is possible, but it does not appear to be politically feasible. Although the ultimate decision belongs to Washington, which has yet to deliver the official withdrawal notification to Russia, its execution will incur serious implications for European security, NATO cohesion, and the future of arms control.

The landmark 1987 accord between the Soviet Union (now Russia) and the United States removed a major threat to European security by eliminating an entire class of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles, those with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, together with their launchers.
The INF Treaty contributes to strategic stability and reduces the risk of miscalculation that could lead to conflict, yet its future has become increasingly uncertain due to a festering U.S. dispute with Russia. In 2014, Washington publicly alleged that Moscow had violated the pact by testing and, since 2017, deploying a prohibited cruise missile system, known as the SSC-8 or 9M729 in U.S. and Russian designations, respectively.¹

Russian officials have responded with counteraccusations, including that the Mk-41 launchers for the U.S. ground-based ballistic missile defense interceptors deployed now in Romania and soon in Poland could be used to launch offensive INF Treaty-range cruise missiles.² Further, Russia takes the position that U.S. target missiles for ballistic missile defense interceptor tests and U.S. armed drones should be counted under the INF Treaty restrictions.

Both parties have discussed their mutual allegations at two meetings of the Special Verification Commission (SVC), a treaty-mandated forum to address compliance disputes, and through other diplomatic channels.³ Yet, they have consistently failed to agree on the facts, let alone find a solution. Each side claims to be in compliance. The U.S. Department of State has “repeatedly refuted baseless Russian allegations in detail.”⁴ Moscow denies the “absolutely groundless [U.S.] accusations.”⁵ Meanwhile, however, Russia acknowledged that the 9M729 cruise missile exists, but claims that it has neither been developed nor tested for a range banned by the INF Treaty and its deployment is taking place in strict compliance with the treaty.⁶

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Russia considers that the INF Treaty, “though not ideal in modern conditions,” still has value, and that “scrapping one of the key arms control mechanisms would be fundamentally counterproductive.” Speaking at a Moscow news briefing November 26, he said, “We are ready to work to maintain its viability. Russia is open to any mutually beneficial proposals that takes into account the interests of both parties.”

European Reactions

Although the INF Treaty is a cornerstone of European security, most European governments have remained on the sidelines in this dispute because, for one thing, no European NATO allies are party to the agreement. Hence, they do not see themselves as empowered to pressure Moscow or Washington publicly on solutions. Further, the INF Treaty is more of a political symbol to Europeans than a military restraint because they already are within range of Russia’s conventional and nuclear missiles. In addition, some European governments initially viewed the U.S. evidence of presumed Russian violation as not compelling enough.² As a consequence, it took Washington more than three years to persuade its NATO allies. Finally and probably most importantly, European allies differ among themselves in their preferred approach toward Russia.
European responses to Trump’s termination announcement reflect this variation. On one end of the spectrum, allies that support strengthening NATO in a manner that deters but does not threaten Russia prefer to remain in dialogue with Moscow. For example, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was the first to express regret about Trump’s announcement.\(^8\) Despite sympathy for U.S. frustration in dealing with Russia, he called the decision a “mistake” and pledged diplomatic engagement with Moscow and Washington to save the accord.\(^9\) Maas also made it clear that Germany has no appetite for an arms race in Europe.\(^10\) Similarly, immediately after the withdrawal announcement, French President Emmanuel Macron picked up the phone and reminded his counterpart in the White House of the importance France ascribes to the treaty, in particular for European security and strategic stability.\(^11\)

On the other end of the spectrum, some European allies believe that strength is the only currency that the Kremlin understands and put very little trust in a dialogue with Moscow. Standing “absolutely resolute” with the U.S. president, UK Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson accused Russia of “making a mockery” of the INF Treaty.\(^12\) Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz declared “a similar” stance on and “understanding” for the U.S. decision.\(^13\)

The announcement of an impending U.S. withdrawal has yet another dimension exposing the deterioration of NATO cohesion. By threatening withdrawal, Washington is acting against NATO’s official stance. At the July 2018 summit in Brussels, 29 heads of state and government of the North Atlantic Council, NATO’s most senior decision-making body, declared their commitment to the “preservation of this landmark arms control treaty” and pledged to “engage Russia on this issue in bilateral and multilateral formats.”\(^14\)

Three weeks before the announcement, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis assured NATO allies that any U.S. decision on the INF Treaty would be made “in concert with our allies, as always.”\(^15\) Yet, the White House acted unilaterally. As a result, the announcement only adds another setback to relations between the Trump administration and European allies, for whom display of NATO unity and solidarity is of utmost importance when facing Russia.

**Europe Bears the Consequences**
If the threat of withdrawal succeeds in bringing Russia back to compliance, it will certainly be an achievement that could reinvigorate arms control more broadly. Nevertheless, the attempt is risky. If it fails, its consequences could generate predominantly unfavorable side effects for Europe without visible advantages on the horizon.

First, the threat of withdrawal will not automatically bring Russia back to compliance; an actual withdrawal even less so. At the same time, dumping the treaty means that the United States and subsequently NATO give up the legal basis on which they are entitled to insist on Russia’s return to compliance. No INF Treaty means no possibility to pressure Moscow on the elements of its alleged missile and limits avenues to verify whether it violated the treaty.

Second, without the INF Treaty, Russia could freely field an unlimited number of the allegedly developed intermediate-range cruise missiles in the vicinity of Europe, while NATO has neither offensive nor defensive capabilities with which to credibly respond in the short term.

Third, no European government has offered to host U.S. INF Treaty-range missiles. According to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, “NATO has no intention to deploy new nuclear missiles in Europe.” Yet, the potential appetite of some European governments to capitalize on hosting conventional intermediate-range cruise missiles, should the United States decide to field them, could deepen NATO’s divide and play into Moscow’s hands.

Fourth, what happens with the INF Treaty will likely determine the future of arms control. The death of the INF Treaty without solving the compliance issue could impede prospects for extending existing agreements, such as the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), and negotiating new ones.

Finally, the way NATO deals with the INF Treaty reflects on its credibility and leadership within the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. Just last year, European NATO allies stood side by side with United States in opposition to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, aligning themselves with the position that a step-by-step approach on nuclear disarmament is a better course. With the U.S. termination of the Iran nuclear deal, an INF Treaty deathwatch underway, and an extension of New START in question, the standing of NATO’s nuclear and non-nuclear countries as trustworthy partners, although differently, will be heavily at stake.

Can the INF Treaty Be Saved?
So far, Washington and NATO have been unsuccessful in their attempts to induce Russia to address compliance concerns.\textsuperscript{17} In line with the Trump Administration INF Treaty Integrated Strategy,\textsuperscript{18} the administration pursued diplomatic measures, including convening that month the second SVC meeting. At a June 2018 round of expert-level talks in Geneva, U.S. officials called on Russia to halt testing, production, and deployment of the 9M729 missile, but there have been no follow-on discussions, apparently due to Moscow’s refusal.\textsuperscript{19}

The Helsinki summit between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in July 2018 and the August 2018 talks in Geneva between U.S. national security adviser John Bolton and Russian counterpart Nikolai Patrushev also made no progress. Neither did imposing sanctions on Russian companies involved in research and development of the disputed missile, nor pursuing research on its own INF Treaty-noncompliant missile system. Earlier this year, for its part, NATO tried to create political pressure on Moscow by stating that, absent a credible response, it will assume Russia is in violation.\textsuperscript{20}

Because diplomatic, economic, and military measures have not prompted Russia to address compliance concerns in a sufficient manner, announcing the intent to withdraw appears a logical consequence. Yet, not only is its timing questionable, but both sides have failed to exhaust all potential avenues to address mutual concerns.

Although development of a noncompliant missile carries a different qualitative weight than deployment of an alleged launcher, both are legitimate concerns. In expecting Russia to prove its compliance with the INF Treaty, the United States did not offer to demonstrate its own adherence. European allies have unconditionally sided with Washington, not pressing the United States on compliance questions, judged to be spurious at best.\textsuperscript{21}

Provided enough political will in Moscow, Washington, and NATO capitals, mutual inspections could shed more light on the compliance questions. In exchange for Russia addressing concerns about the alleged missile system, NATO allies could assure Russia that NATO’s ballistic missile defense launchers will not and cannot be used for offensive purposes. Such an approach has strong backing by former high-level officials and experts from Vancouver to Vladivostok.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet, such a solution might be far more complicated. The United States now publicly alleges that Moscow initially flight tested the 9M729 to distances well over 500 kilometers from a fixed launcher and then tested the same missile at ranges below 500 kilometers from a mobile launcher. By putting the two types of tests together, Russia was able to develop a missile that flies more than 500 km and launches from a ground-mobile platform, which would put it in violation of the INF Treaty.\textsuperscript{23} If Moscow were to offer credible exhibitions of the alleged missile that show it to indeed be noncompliant with the INF Treaty, the logical outcome would require Russia to eliminate the missiles plus halt any further testing, production, and deployment.

If Russia does not agree to mutual verification, the United States and its NATO allies could reclaim the moral high ground by demonstrating that Moscow, not Washington, is scrapping arms control treaties. This seems like a pragmatic offer because the United States is convinced of its own compliance and because, in other spheres, military transparency is such a point of pride for the United States and NATO.

Initiating goodwill on NATO side, however, will be no a small feat. Allies predominantly blame Russia for the current state of the INF Treaty. After countless unsuccessful attempts to reach out to Moscow, they consider the ball to be in Russia’s court.\textsuperscript{24} Also, winning NATO unanimity on such a proposal will be politically challenging. Furthermore, allies endeavor not to create any impression of getting back to what they call “business as usual” with Moscow, and any offer going beyond the current agenda could be seen as crossing this line. Yet, apart from the INF Treaty, NATO has nothing to lose.

**Questions for the Future**

With the accord in severe jeopardy, the alliance faces the “need to assess the implications of the new Russian missile,” according to Stoltenberg.\textsuperscript{25} Such an assessment has military and arms
control dimensions.

The motivation for the alleged Russian breach remains largely unclear. Successive U.S. administrations have not attributed a motive either. Only the recent U.S. Nuclear Posture Review report states that “Moscow believes these systems may provide useful options for escalation advantage.”

A new, land-based, INF Treaty-range missile could compliment already existing Russian sea- and air-launched cruise missiles with additional mobility and agility, more difficult detection capabilities, and reduced warning time, enabling a faster or surprise attack (e.g., against U.S. Aegis Ashore installations in Europe).

European allies and Washington reportedly have been weighing a set of some three dozen military and diplomatic responses to the Russian breach. The former could include extending NATO ballistic missile defense with capabilities to defend against cruise missiles, increasing the readiness level of NATO dual-capable aircraft proscribed for its nuclear mission, strengthening the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence in Europe, deploying a conventional INF Treaty-range ground-launched cruise missile in Europe, and introducing new nuclear sea-launched cruise missiles to the U.S. arsenal. Except for cruise missile defense, however, these measures would neither directly defend Europe from noncompliant Russian cruise missiles nor plausibly be explained as a response to the INF Treaty violation.

To some degree, military responses could worsen NATO-Russian relations. Additional military measures bear the risk of fueling Moscow’s sense of being under siege and thus leading to a Russian military counterreaction. Pledges to refrain from deploying INF Treaty-class missiles in Europe, provided the other side does not deploy them, would be one option to mitigate an unnecessary and costly arms spiral in Europe.

The demise of the INF Treaty and internal NATO deliberations over an appropriate response could require reopening a broader discussion on the NATO deterrence and defense posture. Allies went through this difficult process a decade ago and were barely able to find agreement. Although the security situation differs today from when NATO perceived Russia its “partner,” reopening such discussions holds the potential risk of strengthening the role of nuclear weapons, an issue tremendously sensitive for individual NATO allies.

At the same time, the current INF Treaty crisis marks yet another blow to the European security architecture and raises a more general question: What shall future arms control look like? Should the INF Treaty eventually collapse, Europe and the United States could offer Moscow the chance to work on a modern successor. Utilizing the INF Treaty as a blueprint, they could think of limiting the number of intermediate-range missiles instead of banning them completely, limiting cruise missile deployments geographically, prohibiting nuclear-tipped cruise missiles, or multilateralizing and extending the treaty’s scope.

Such a preservation effort should not be seen as a reward for Russia’s bad behavior. Rather, it should be recognized as an investment in preventing an arms race, as a step to realize the European commitment to nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament, and as a way for Europe to remain central in shaping the global nuclear weapons landscape. As with the Iran nuclear accord, Europe has a major role to play and a major stake in the outcome.

ENDNOTES


10. German Federal Foreign Office, “Preventing a New Arms Race.”


25. NATO, “Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg Ahead of Exercise Trident Juncture 2018.”


27. NATO, “Keynote Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the ‘NATO Talk Around the Brandenburg Tor’ Conference.”


29. NPR Report.

30. Ibid.

31. Because cruise missile defense is not an off-the-shelf-product, its development would require

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