What Can the EU Do to Reduce the Nuclear Threat?

Remarks by Greg Thielmann
Polis 180 Fireside Chat
Powerless Europe? The Future of Nuclear Weapons Policy in Europe
Berlin, Germany
November 28, 2018

Toward the end of October, President Donald Trump announced at a political rally that the United States would be withdrawing from the 31-year old Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (“INF”) Treaty, which had banned an entire category of ground-based missiles from the U.S. and Russian arsenals. There has since been considerable discussion about what this decision portends for the entire nuclear arms control enterprise. I cannot presume to know how Germany and other European states can best protect their national security interests. But I can offer some thoughts on how Europe can help America cope with the Trump phenomenon, which I see as America’s greatest leadership crisis in my lifetime.

My first job as a diplomat in the Department of State was to help implement the 1979 “Dual-Track” decision of NATO (der Doppelbeschluss)—according to which NATO planned to deploy 572 nuclear-tipped missiles in Europe while seeking to negotiate equal but lower limits on the 600 Soviet theater missiles already deployed against NATO. The government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt played a critical role in pushing for such action. He worried that the U.S.-Soviet Strategic Arms Limitation Talks process had left Europe vulnerable to a growing force of Mittelstrecken Raketen for which it had no comparable counter. Indeed, the SS-20s being deployed were more mobile, longer-range, less vulnerable, and more accurate than the SS-4 and SS-5 missiles they were replacing. Moreover, they would carry three times as many warheads.

The only U.S. nuclear weapons based in Europe which could reach Soviet territory then were carried by medium-range bombers, themselves increasingly vulnerable to Soviet anti-aircraft weapons. And thus, the scene was set for a highly-charged contest of wills between the Soviet Union, the United States, and the five NATO countries that had agreed to station new INF missiles on their territories. Germany would have the largest and most critical contingent, including 108 very accurate and fast Pershing II ballistic missiles.

I was present in Geneva at the opening of the negotiations 37 years ago this Friday. I was also present for three years in Embassy Bonn’s Political Section, when the first U.S. deployments arrived in 1983—the “Year of the missile”—and when the Soviet negotiators walked out of the Geneva negotiations.

But with the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, the mood changed and negotiations resumed the next year. By the end of 1987, the Soviet leader and Ronald Reagan had signed a “zero-zero” treaty with an even lower range floor on banned missiles than the parties had first discussed. Within three years of the treaty entering into force, nearly 2,700 missiles had been eliminated.

This saga is worth recalling—partly to appreciate how unlikely such an outcome seemed in 1979 and how much the treaty ultimately contributed to the reductions of Cold War tensions. It is also important to realize how important the treaty’s verification provisions were for establishing precedents applied to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which followed in 1991. And to
remember the creative and hard-working personnel on both sides, who conscientiously fulfilled the treaty obligations.

During the last decade, there have been voices raised in both Moscow and Washington, arguing that the treaty had outlived its usefulness in a post-Cold War world where the European situation was fundamentally different and a world where third countries were increasing their arsenals of intermediate-range missiles.

In 2014, the United States officially accused Russia of testing a cruise missile with a range in excess of that allowed by the treaty. Russia, in turn, levied three charges against the United States, the most serious being that the U.S. missile defense launchers being deployed in Romania were prohibited because they were capable of launching cruise missiles banned under the treaty.

These compliance concerns have now been subject to confidential discussions between the United States and Russia for five years without resolution. Although Trump’s announcement that the United States intended to withdraw from the INF Treaty appeared to be the beginning of the end, it was not the first step taken in that direction. Moscow appears to have decided a decade ago to ignore the treaty’s range limits on cruise missiles. Last year’s U.S. defense budget included research and development funding for new ground-based missiles, which would eventually violate the treaty when they are first flight-tested.

It is my contention, and the view of the U.S.-Russian-German “Deep Cuts Commission” (of which I’m a member) that neither side has made sufficient efforts to use the treaty’s verification mechanism to address this problem.

There is still time. The treaty requires six months notice before withdrawal can occur, and that notice has still not been officially provided.

Ironically, the U.S. revelation in public last year of the Russian manufacturer and designator of the offending missile has opened up a path to resolution, which has not yet been explored. After years of Moscow saying it did not know what the United States was talking about, it now acknowledges having developed and deployed the missile in question—the Novator 9M729—but says the United States is wrong about its capabilities. There is now a curious parallelism in the U.S. response to Russia’s complaints about the missile defense launchers in Romania and Poland. Washington contends that the Aegis Ashore Mk 41 launchers are not capable of doing what the Mk 41 launchers at sea can do.

The argument is now ripe for an invitation to experts for mutual on-site inspection and technical discussions to examine the capabilities of the systems in dispute. Yet neither side has made such a proposal! Here is where Germany and its fellow NATO members can play a constructive role. Russia’s 9M729 cruise missiles threaten the territory of NATO’s European members. The U.S. missile defense deployments in Eastern Europe have been endorsed by NATO. The alliance should press hard for Washington and Moscow to get serious about resolving this issue by conducting mutual inspections and taking necessary confidence-building steps. The onus for the dissolution of the treaty should fall heavily on the side, which refuses this obvious path on INF and fails to pursue the rejuvenation of talks on strategic arms control.

Germany can buttress its diplomatic initiatives on this and other nuclear issues by fulfilling its commitment to increase its defense budget. Russia takes seriously NATO’s policy of regarding an attack on any member as an attack on all members. The best way to increase the credibility of NATO’s mutual defense commitment is for Germany to strengthen its conventional defenses, continue hosting the deployment of U.S. troops, and participating in the modest but important defense measures in the Baltic states.

I hope Germany will remember that Trump became president through our peculiar electoral college system, which awarded him the job after losing the popular vote by nearly 3 million. Although our system may be flawed, it does self-correct, and that slow process has begun. America is, at long last, rising to the challenge that Trump poses to our institutions and our friends in the world. Our press is vibrant; our courts remain independent; and the mid-term elections have just returned control of the
U.S. House of Representatives to the opposition party; even the executive branch agencies have just delivered a stinging rebuke to the administration’s shameful denial of climate change science.

I especially want to highlight the significance of the Democratic Party winning control over the House of Representatives. Defense funding must pass the Senate and the House to become law. Democratic Party leaders have been opposed to Trump’s plan to introduce new nuclear weapons and they advocate a “no-first-use” policy for the U.S. deterrent.

There will be tensions as Germany looks after its obligations and pursues its national interests. But Americans need to remember what close friends do to protect each other from folly. My model is the refusal of Germany to join the United States and Britain in their disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003. Our long-term interests were betrayed by London; not by Berlin. Likewise, when the United States violated its commitments under the 7-party Iran Nuclear Deal, Germany, Britain, and France are trying to honor theirs. A focus on our mutual long-term interests is important for the difficult days ahead.

- Greg Thielmann
- Russia
- Nuclear Nonproliferation
- INF Treaty

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/events/2018-11/what-eu-reduce-nuclear-threat