

Arms Experts Urge Russia and U.S. to Preserve Missile Treaty, Pursue More Arms Talks

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Press Release

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(Washington, D.C.): Arms Control Association (ACA) experts today urged Russian and U.S. leaders to maintain an historic 1987 nuclear arms and missile accord that helped ease Cold War tensions and slow the superpower nuclear arms race. The accord continues to ensure that Europe does not emerge once again as an arena for a revived U.S.-Russian arms competition, the experts said.

Russian leaders have hinted recently that they are contemplating withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which prohibits U.S. and Russian possession of nuclear and conventional ground-launched missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. General Yuri Baluyevsky, Russia's chief of general staff, spoke most recently, saying yesterday that Russia would be justified in pulling out of the agreement. Russian officials have cited U.S. plans to deploy strategic missile interceptors in Europe and the growing missile capabilities of other countries as triggering Moscow's INF deliberations.

"Russian withdrawal from the INF Treaty could revive a dormant Cold War nuclear rivalry and complicate stalled U.S. and Russian talks to secure deeper verifiable and permanent reductions in their excessive strategic and tactical nuclear stockpiles," said Daryl G. Kimball, ACA executive director.

The INF Treaty marked the first time that the United States and then-Soviet Union agreed to reduce their nuclear arsenals, eliminate an entire category of nuclear weaponry, and utilize extensive on-site inspections for verifying compliance. All told, the two sides destroyed a total of 2,692 short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missiles by the treaty's June 1, 1991 implementation deadline. Neither Russia nor the United States now deploys such systems.

"The White House and congressional leaders should urge Russia not to abandon the INF Treaty," Kimball recommended. He also encouraged the U.S. and Russian governments to "engage in talks to accelerate the drawdown of their strategic nuclear weapons and to account for and eliminate their tactical nuclear weapons arsenals." The size and security of Russia's tactical nuclear arms holdings are unknown, while the United States deploys roughly 480 tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

In addition, the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) is set to expire in December 2009. If START lapses and Russia scuttles the INF Treaty, the sole agreement left to restrict U.S. and Russian nuclear force levels would be the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. This agreement lacks verification provisions and its ceiling of 2,200 operationally deployed strategic warheads expires in December 2012. The United States currently claims to operationally deploy approximately 3,900 strategic warheads, and it keeps thousands of additional warheads in reserve. Russia fields some 4,300 strategic warheads, according to its latest accounting under START.

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“Without the transparency and limits of the START and INF accords, the United States and Russia risk returning to the distrust, worst-case assumptions, and arms competition of the past,” warned Wade Boese, ACA research director.

“Russia’s overreaction to the possible fielding of up to 10 unproven U.S. missile interceptors already underscores the fragile state of U.S.-Russian security relations,” Boese stated.

He recommended that in addition to talks on extending START or its verification regime, “the former rivals should explore measures to address Russian concerns about any future stationing of U.S. anti-missile systems in Europe.” Boese concluded, “Such a process would be a much more constructive approach than carelessly scrapping the INF Treaty.”

Additional information on U.S. and Russian nuclear agreements and the status of their nuclear arsenals is available at ACA’s strategic reductions internet resource page at <http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/sr/>.

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