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Demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

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Summary

In 1987 the US and Russia formally agreed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, under which both sides agreed to eliminate all nuclear-armed, ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500km, their transporter/launcher mechanisms and any associated infrastructure. It was the first treaty to eliminate an entire category of weapons from the nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia and ended a nuclear stand-off in Cold War Europe.

In February 2019 the United States announced the suspension of its INF obligations amid longstanding allegations of Russian non-compliance, and on 2 August 2019 formally withdrew from the Treaty.

Background to the dispute

After several years of suspicion and rumour, it was only in 2014 that the US formally, and publicly, accused Russia of being in violation of the INF treaty, following reported Russian testing of a new ground-launched cruise missile (the Novator 9M729/ NATO designation SSC-8) with a range of between 500km and 5,500km. In 2017 the US suggested that Russia had advanced beyond flight testing and had begun to field the missile in question, a move which violated “the spirit and intent” of the INF treaty.

Consequently, in December 2017 the US announced that it would introduce economic and military measures to induce Russia back into compliance, which included sanctions and a review of the research and development options for new US conventional, ground-launched intermediate-range missiles. The 2018 US *Nuclear Posture Review* reiterated these measures, whilst also recommending the reintroduction of nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles as an INF-compliant response to Russia’s alleged violation. However, both the NPR and the US State Department indicated that the US could cease its pursuit of either option if Russia returned to full and verifiable compliance with its INF obligations.

Allegations of non-compliance were consistently disputed by the Russian government which stated that the missile in question had a much shorter range than the US suggested and criticised the US for not providing evidence to the contrary. In turn, Russia also accused the US itself of violating the INF Treaty with the fielding of its ballistic missile defence system in Europe, which they argued can launch intermediate-range Tomahawk cruise missiles. Russia also suggested that the US’ development and deployment of unmanned combat aerial vehicles was a breach of the treaty’s provisions.

Attempts to resolve the INF impasse

Both sides indicated that they were willing to engage in dialogue on the INF treaty, although nothing substantive emerged from the few meetings that took place. Allegations and counter-allegations of non-compliance continued to be levelled by both parties, while practical efforts or proposals toward allaying the concerns of either side were distinctly lacking. This led to concern among commentators and experts that there was, in fact, little genuine interest, by either side, in resolving the dispute.

Indeed, many within the Russian government have long considered the INF treaty discriminatory, and one which places a greater burden on Russia which, unlike the US, is surrounded by third countries in possession of significant intermediate-range cruise missile capabilities. Several Russian critics also expressed the belief that the treaty inhibits Russia’s effective use of its nuclear forces to offset the deficiencies in its conventional military capabilities, in particular in Europe. As such many observers considered that, for Russia,

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the strategic benefits to be gained from non-compliance with the INF treaty could, in fact, be worth it.

In the United States the treaty equally had its critics, including President Trump's former National Security Adviser John Bolton who referred to the INF in 2014 as an "obsolete treaty even before Russian cheated", and advocated pulling out of the treaty, regardless of whether Russia was compliant or not.

US withdrawal

The influence of John Bolton was considered, by many commentators, to be the reason behind President Trump's announcement at a campaign rally on 20 October 2018 that the US would withdraw from the INF treaty. The announcement was regarded as a significant setback for international arms control and met with concern from allies and arms control experts alike, who argued that it could lead to an unconstrained and dangerous nuclear arms competition with Russia and undermine security in Europe.

On 4 December 2018 the US administration announced that it would suspend its obligations under the INF treaty if Russia failed to come back into compliance within 60 days. Following the failure of further talks, on 1 February 2019 President Trump formally announced the US' intention to suspend its obligations under the INF treaty, effective as of 2 February, and that the US would begin the process of withdrawal. That process would be completed in 6 months unless Russia came back into compliance by "destroying all of its violating missiles, launchers, and associated equipment".

Russian response

Russia responded by announcing tit-for-tat measures, with the formal suspension of Russian involvement in the INF treaty and the start of work on new missile capabilities prohibited by the treaty.

What now?

With the collapse of the INF treaty on 2 August 2019, both Parties are now free to pursue the development and deployment of ground-launched intermediate-range missiles and in August 2019 the US tested a ground-launched variant of its Tomahawk cruise missile, which would have previously been prohibited under the treaty. However, both sides have stated that they will not be the first to deploy such weapons in Europe, although they have also suggested that they will respond to any escalation of the situation by the other side.

The NATO Secretary General confirmed that the Alliance will respond in a measured and responsible way, and is currently examining a "balanced, coordinated and defensive package of measures to ensure NATO's deterrence and defence posture remains credible and effective".

For arms control more broadly, such an outcome does not bode well for discussions on the extension or replacement of the New START treaty, which is due to lapse in 2021. It is now the only treaty placing checks on the nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia. If it is allowed to expire, there will be no limitations on the arsenals of the world's two largest nuclear powers for the first time since 1972, prompting fears of a quantitative, as well as qualitative nuclear arms race.

1. Background

1.1 What was the INF treaty?

In December 1987 the Soviet Union and the US signed a [Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces](#) (INF) under which both sides agreed to eliminate all nuclear-armed ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500km, their transporter/launcher mechanisms and any associated infrastructure.

Under Article VI both sides also agreed not to produce, or flight test, any missiles which fall within the treaty's parameters. The treaty also provided for an extensive on-site inspection regime; while a Special Verification Commission was established in order to promote the objectives and implementation of the provisions of the treaty.

The treaty entered into force in June 1988 and within three years both countries had met their obligations under the treaty, withdrawing an entire class of nuclear weapons from their respective nuclear arsenals,¹ and ending a nuclear stand-off in Europe.²

The system of verification was subsequently wound up in 2001, although the Special Verification Commission remained as a forum to discuss and resolve any implementation and compliance issues and to consider additional steps to improve the effectiveness of the treaty.

1.2 Background to the dispute

After several years of suspicion and rumour, it was only in 2014 that the US formally, and publicly, accused Russia of being in violation of the INF Treaty. The accusations followed reported Russian testing of a new ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) with a range of between 500km and 5,500km.³

Amid suggestions that the US had mistaken the testing of the new missile for a sea-based cruise missile that would be permitted under the treaty, in evidence to the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces in December 2015, US administration officials stated:

There has been some speculation about which missile the United States is referring to and whether we have mistaken its testing for a treaty-compliant sea-based cruise missile... The evidence is conclusive. Russia has tested this ground-based system well into the ranges covered by the INF Treaty. We are talking about a real system and not a potential capability.⁴

In 2017 the US provided more information on Russian non-compliance, while also suggesting that Russia had advanced beyond flight testing

¹ 2,692 intermediate-range missiles were destroyed as a result of the accord.

² Out of range of the continental United States, except for Alaska, Soviet missiles destroyed under the terms of the treaty were primarily aimed at European NATO states.

³ Prior to this it had been suspected that a new cruise missile was under development, but it was the move into testing that constituted a violation of the INF.

⁴ Richard Fieldhouse, "INF Treaty impasse: time for Russian action", *Arms Control Today*, February 2016

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and had begun to field the missile in question, a move which violated “the spirit and intent” of the INF treaty. President Trump called the deployment of a treaty-prohibited GLCM “a big deal”,⁵ while the Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Paul Selva, told the House Armed Services Committee that Russia had “deliberately deployed the missile to military units in order to pose a threat to NATO and to facilities within the NATO area of responsibility”.⁶

US officials publicly identified the non-compliant missile as the Novator 9M729 (NATO designation SSC-8). The missile is widely believed to be a ground-based version of the Novator 3M14 Kalibr sea-launched cruise missile, which was INF treaty compliant. It is nuclear-capable, road-mobile and is able to strike European countries within minutes of launch. As such it is considered to lower the threshold for nuclear use.

As a consequence, in December 2017 the US announced that it would introduce economic and military measures in order to induce Russia back into compliance, including sanctions and a review of the research and development options for new US conventional, ground-launched intermediate-range missiles.⁷ Congress had previously approved funding for research and development of a treaty-prohibited GLCM in the [2018 Defense Authorization Act](#).

The US Nuclear Posture Review,⁸ published in February 2018, reiterated those measures, while also recommending the reintroduction of nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles. Both missile options represented an INF-compliant response to Russia’s alleged violation.⁹ However, both the NPR and the US State Department indicated that the US could cease its pursuit of either option if Russia returned to full and verifiable compliance with its INF obligations.¹⁰ For the future of the treaty itself, the NPR stated:

Regarding the INF Treaty, the United States complies with and remains committed to preserving the Treaty. However, the value of the INF Treaty, or any arms control treaty, depends on all parties remaining in compliance. For over four years, the United States has pressed Russia to return to compliance and will continue to exert appropriate pressure to restore Russian compliance and preserve the INF Treaty.

Nevertheless, Moscow must understand that the United States will not forever endure Russia’s continuing non-compliance. The status quo, in which the United States continues to comply while

⁵ “Trump wants to expand US nuclear arsenal, make it ‘top of the pack’”, *Arms Control Today*, April 2017

⁶ House Armed Services Committee, [Transcript of Hearing on Military Assessment of Nuclear Deterrence Requirements](#), 8 March 2017

⁷ [US Department of State Press Statement](#), 8 December 2017

⁸ The details of the US Nuclear Posture Review are examined in greater detail in Library briefing paper CBP7990, *President Trump: The Nuclear Question*

⁹ GLCM research is allowed under the INF treaty so long as it does not extend to testing and manufacture; while sea-launched cruise missiles are not covered by the treaty.

¹⁰ US Nuclear Posture Review, P.55 and [US Department of State Press Statement](#), 8 December 2017

Russia continues deployments in violation of the Treaty, is untenable.¹¹

Yet, several commentators, including Hans Kristensen, Director of the Nuclear Information Project, argued that the idea of using an SLCM to bring Russia back into the compliance with the INF was flawed and would be counterproductive in the longer term. Outlining the fact that the US already had a nuclear cruise missile in its inventory when Russia first started developing its treaty-prohibited missile, he questioned “why would a SLCM make them back down? The idea to use SLCM to make Russia reduce its nonstrategic arsenal is strange because everyone knows it’s used to compensate for Russia’s inferior conventional forces. Increasing US nonstrategic forces could make Russia further increase its nonstrategic forces.”¹²

1.3 Russian rejection and counter-claims

Allegations of non-compliance have been consistently disputed by the Russian government which has stated that the missile in question has a much shorter range than the US suggested and criticised the US for not providing evidence to the contrary. A Russian Foreign Ministry statement in December 2017 accused the US of continuing to “bring forward unfounded accusations of Russia’s breaching the treaty” and said that “attempts to communicate with us in the language of ultimatums or to put military and political pressure on Russia through sanctions are unacceptable”.¹³

In turn, Russia also accused the US of violating the INF Treaty with the fielding of its ballistic missile defence system in Europe, which they argued can launch intermediate-range Tomahawk cruise missiles, which would be prohibited under the treaty.¹⁴ Russia also suggested that the US’ development, and deployment, of unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) is a breach of the treaty’s provisions.¹⁵

In 2016 the Obama administration responded by stating that “all of Russia’s claims past and present, are categorically unfounded. The United States has been and remains in compliance with all its obligations under the INF Treaty. These Russian claims are meant to divert attention from its own violation”.¹⁶

¹¹ US Nuclear Posture Review, p.74

¹² “Will the US trade its new sub-launched cruise missile for Russian arms treaty compliance?”, *Defense News*, 7 February 2018

¹³ As reported by [New China](#)

¹⁴ The Aegis Ashore system, incorporating the MK-41 launcher, is part of the US’ European Phased Adaptive Approach programme which is being constructed in Romania and Poland. While Aegis Ashore incorporates the Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptor missile, the MK-41 launcher is capable of launching other missiles, including the Tomahawk cruise missile in service with the US Navy. If launched from the ground on an MK-41 launcher it would fall within the remit of the INF treaty.

¹⁵ A detailed examination of how the US appears to have violated the INF treaty was published by the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) in February 2019.

¹⁶ Richard Fieldhouse, “INF Treaty impasse: time for Russian action”, *Arms Control Today*, February 2016

2. Efforts to resolve the impasse

Both sides indicated that they were willing to engage in dialogue on the INF treaty, although nothing substantive emerged from the few meetings that took place.¹⁷

Despite the political overtures, allegations and counter-allegations of non-compliance continued to be levelled by both parties, while practical efforts or proposals toward allaying the concerns of either side were distinctly lacking. This led to concern among commentators and experts that there was, in fact, little genuine interest, by either side, in resolving the dispute.

Indeed, many within the Russian government have long considered the INF treaty discriminatory, and one which places a greater burden on Russia which, unlike the US, is surrounded by third countries in possession of significant intermediate-range cruise missile capabilities, including China, India, Pakistan, Israel and Iran. Several Russian critics have also expressed the belief that the treaty inhibits Russia's effective use of its nuclear forces in order to offset the deficiencies in its conventional military capabilities, in particular in Europe.¹⁸ As such many observers considered that, for Russia, the strategic benefits to be gained from non-compliance with the INF treaty could, in fact, be worth it.

In the United States the treaty equally had its critics. The belief that the INF treaty constrained the US's ability to pushback against Russian aggression and intimidation on the world stage was reflected in Congress' approval of R&D funding for a new intermediate-range GLCM in the *Defense Authorization Act 2018*. The Act stated:

The Department of Defense... has stated that it has multiple validated military requirement gaps due to the prohibitions imposed on the United States as a result of its compliance with the INF treaty.

It is not in the national security interests of the United States to be unilaterally legally prohibited from developing dual-capable ground-launched cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, while Russia makes advances in developing and fielding this class of weapon systems, and such unilateral limitation cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely.¹⁹

In testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2017 Admiral Harris, Commander of US Pacific Command, also expressed his concerns over third country development of intermediate-range cruise missile capabilities that are not constrained by the treaty. He suggested that, while "there's goodness in the INF treaty, anything you can do to limit nuclear weapons writ-large is generally good...the aspects of the

¹⁷ The Special Verification Commission, provided for under the INF Treaty, met in November 2016 and December 2017 but failed to make any progress.

¹⁸ The use of Russian nuclear forces to offset its conventional capabilities is examined in greater detail in Library briefing paper CBP 7877, [Russia's Rearmament Programme](#)

¹⁹ Defense Authorization Act 2018, Sec. 1242

INF treaty that limit our ability to counter Chinese and other countries' land-based missiles, I think, is problematic".²⁰

In October 2018 the US Ambassador to NATO suggested that while the US remained committed to a diplomatic solution, it would "match its capabilities" if the Russian 9M729 system became operational and that Russia "was on notice".²¹

Significantly, however, President Trump's former National Security Adviser John Bolton was also a longstanding critic of the INF treaty. In a commentary piece for the *Wall Street Journal* back in September 2014 he referred to it as an "obsolete treaty even before Russian cheated", arguing that:

Moscow's arms-control treaty violations give America the opportunity to discard obsolete, Cold War-era limits on its own arsenal, and upgrade its military capabilities to match its global responsibilities.²²

In December 2017 he advocated cancelling the INF treaty, regardless of whether Russia was compliant or not, as it would allow the US to explore different combinations of weapon types and basing options across all the services.²³

2.1 US notification of withdrawal

The influence of John Bolton was considered, by many commentators, to be the reason behind President Trump's announcement at a campaign rally on 20 October 2018 that the US would withdraw from the INF treaty.²⁴ Speaking to reporters after the event President Trump commented:

Russia has violated the agreement. They've been violating it for many years and I don't know why President Obama didn't negotiate or pull out.

We're not going to let them violate a nuclear agreement and do weapons and we're not allowed to. We're the ones that have stayed in the agreement and we've honoured the agreement but Russia has not unfortunately honoured the agreement so we're going to terminate the agreement, we're going to pull out.²⁵

The announcement was considered a significant setback for international arms control and was met with concern from allies in Europe, who called the INF "extremely important for security, stability in Europe";²⁶ and arms control experts alike. Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif of the Arms Control Association called the move an "unnecessary

²⁰ Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 27 April 2017

²¹ "US warns Russia over secret nuclear missile system", *The Independent*, 3 October 2018

²² John Bolton and John Yoo, "An obsolete nuclear treaty", *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 2014

²³ Ian Anthony, "European security after the INF Treaty", *Survival*, December 2017-January 2018, p.67

²⁴ The last time the US withdrew from a major arms control treaty was in 2002 when the US pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, when John Bolton was Under Secretary for Arms Control at the State Department.

²⁵ As reported in "Trump says US will withdraw from nuclear arms treaty with Russia", *The Guardian*, 21 October 2018

²⁶ [Doorstep statement of the NATO Secretary General](#), 3 October 2018

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and self-defeating wrong turn that could lead to an unconstrained and dangerous nuclear arms competition with Russia”, arguing that:

Trump may want to sound tough, but the reality is that withdrawing from the treaty weakens U.S. and allied security and does not provide the United States any military advantage in Europe or elsewhere.

- U.S. withdrawal does nothing to bring Russia back into compliance with the INF Treaty and it distracts from the fact that it was Russia’s actions that precipitated the INF Treaty crisis.
- U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty opens the door for Russia to produce and deploy the missile of concern, the 9M729, in greater numbers without any constraints.
- There is no military need for the United States to develop, as Trump has proposed, a new and costly INF Treaty-noncompliant missile. The United States can already deploy air- and sea-launched systems that can threaten the same Russian targets that ground-launched missiles that are prohibited by INF Treaty would.
- NATO does not support a new INF Treaty-range missile in Europe and no country has offered to host it. Attempting to force the alliance to accept a new, potentially nuclear missile would divide the alliance in ways that would delight the Kremlin.²⁷

As Jeffrey Lewis, of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies also pointed out: “This is a colossal mistake. Russia gets to violate the treaty and Trump takes the blame”.²⁸

Indeed, the Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, stated that US withdrawal from the INF:

would be a very dangerous step that, I'm sure, not only will not be comprehended by the international community but will provoke serious condemnation...

The treaty is significant for international security and security in the sphere of nuclear arms, for the maintenance of strategic stability.²⁹

He also went on to comment that “if the US continued to behave “clumsily and crudely” and backed out of international agreements, “then we [Russia] will have no choice but to undertake retaliatory measures, including involving military technology [...] But we would not want to get to this stage”.³⁰

In November 2018 Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov held a press conference setting out Russia’s position on the INF treaty, suggesting that “This is of fundamental significance, given that the information

²⁷ “Trump’s counterproductive decision to terminate the INF treaty”, Arms Control Association Issue Brief, 21 October 2018

²⁸ “Trump says US will withdraw from nuclear arms treaty with Russia”, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2018

²⁹ “Russia nuclear treaty: Gorbachev warns Trump plan will undermine disarmament”, *BBC News Online*, 21 October 2018

³⁰ *ibid*

space is filled with dishonest interpretations, idle speculation and clearly false information". He went on to conclude that:

We firmly believe that, given the existing realities, it would be radically counterproductive to destroy one of the key arms control mechanisms... [and] We would like to hope that Washington will after all display the political will and respond to our initiative in a constructive way.³¹

However, at a meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers on 4/5 December 2018 the Alliance once again reiterated its belief that "Russia has developed and fielded a new ground-launched cruise missile system – the SSC-8, or 9M729 – which violates the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and poses significant risks to Euro-Atlantic security". NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg suggested at that meeting that:

There is no question that the United States fully complies with the Treaty. There are no new US missiles in Europe. But there are new Russian missiles in Europe.

Arms control agreements are only effective if they are respected by all sides. A situation where the US abides by the treaty and Russia does not, is simply not sustainable.

As such he called on Russia to "return urgently to full and verifiable compliance with the INF Treaty", cautioning that "we [NATO] must also start to prepare for a world without the Treaty".³²

Indeed, the US administration subsequently announced that it would suspend its obligations under the INF treaty if Russia failed to come back into compliance within 60 days.

2.2 Seeking a solution?

Further talks between US and Russian officials in Geneva in January 2019 and at the meeting of the P5 in Beijing on 31 January 2019 once again failed to resolve the concerns of either party with the same allegations, refutations and counter-arguments presented by both sides.

Consequently on 1 February 2019 President Trump [formally announced](#) the US' intention to suspend its obligations under the INF treaty, effective as of 2 February, and that the US would begin the process of withdrawal, which would be completed in 6 months,³³ unless Russia came back into compliance by "destroying all of its violating missiles, launchers, and associated equipment".

The announcement went on to state:

The United States has fully adhered to the INF Treaty for more than 30 years, but we will not remain constrained by its terms while Russia misrepresents its actions. We cannot be the only country in the world unilaterally bound by this treaty, or any other. We will move forward with developing our own military response options and will work with NATO and our other allies

³¹ Russian Foreign Ministry, [Briefing on developments involving the INF treaty](#), 26 November 2018

³² [NATO Secretary General press conference](#), 5 December 2018

³³ Under [section XV of the INF treaty](#) either Party must give notice of its intention to withdraw six months prior to the actual date of withdrawal.

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and partners to deny Russia any military advantage from its unlawful conduct.

My Administration remains committed to effective arms control that advances United States, allied, and partner security, is verifiable and enforceable, and includes partners that fulfill their obligations. For arms control to effectively contribute to national security, all parties must faithfully implement their obligations. We stand ready to engage with Russia on arms control negotiations that meet these criteria...³⁴

NATO subsequently issued a statement expressing its full support for the US' actions and that:

Unless Russia honours its INF Treaty obligations through the verifiable destruction of all of its 9M729 systems, thereby returning to full and verifiable compliance before the U.S. withdrawal takes effect in six months, Russia will bear sole responsibility for the end of the Treaty.³⁵

The [EU](#) called on the US, however, to consider the consequences of its possible withdrawal from the INF for its own security, the security of its allies and that of the whole world. The EU also called on both the US and Russia to remain engaged in constructive dialogue to preserve the INF Treaty, and on Russia to address the serious concerns regarding its compliance with the treaty.

2.3 Russia's response

In a [Televised meeting](#) between President Putin, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu on 2 February 2019, Russia announced what was widely regarded as a tit-for-tat response with the formal suspension of Russian involvement in the INF treaty.³⁶ President Putin stated:

Our response will be symmetrical. Our US partners announced that they are suspending their participation in the INF Treaty, and we are suspending it too. They said that they are engaged in research, development and design work, and we will do the same.

He went on to confirm that Russia would subsequently begin work on "a land-based version of the Kalibr launchers and work on a new project to develop a land-based hypersonic intermediate-range missile", both prohibited by the treaty. However, he also stated that Russia would not deploy such weapons in Europe, unless the US does first:

We proceed from the premise that Russia will not deploy intermediate-range or shorter-range weapons, if we develop weapons of this kind – neither in Europe nor anywhere else until US weapons of this kind are deployed to the corresponding regions of the world.³⁷

Russia announces tit-for-tat measures

³⁴ [Statement from the President regarding the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#), 1 February 2019

³⁵ NATO press release, Statement on Russia's failure to comply with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, 1 February 2019

³⁶ President Putin subsequently signed an executive order formally suspending Russia's compliance with the INF Treaty on 4 March 2019.

³⁷ President of Russia, [Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu](#), 2 February 2019

3. What now?

The continued failure by either side to engage in any meaningful diplomatic exchange to alleviate each other's concerns and allow for mutual inspections led many commentators to suspect that there was no real appetite for progress by either administration and that broader strategic concerns, such as Chinese military development, were playing a far greater part in any assessment of the INF's worth.³⁸

As Daryl Kimball, Executive Director of the Arms Control Association observed "Each side appears to be more interested in winning the blame game than taking the steps necessary to save the treaty [...] Both sides can still pursue diplomatic efforts to resolve the issue. But there is no chance for progress so long as the two sides refuse to adjust their current positions".³⁹

Subsequently on 2 August 2019 the United States announced its formal withdrawal from the INF treaty. In a statement, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed:

The U.S. withdrawal pursuant to Article XV of the treaty takes effect today because Russia failed to return to full and verified compliance through the destruction of its noncompliant missile system—the SSC-8 or 9M729 ground-launched, intermediate-range cruise missile.

Russia is solely responsible for the treaty's demise [...]

The United States will not remain party to a treaty that is deliberately violated by Russia. Russia's noncompliance under the treaty jeopardizes U.S. supreme interests as Russia's development and fielding of a treaty-violating missile system represents a direct threat to the United States and our allies and partners.⁴⁰

In response the Russian Government issued its own statement in which it placed blame for the collapse of the INF firmly with the United States, suggesting that the US "wanted to free itself from the existing restrictions".⁴¹ China's Foreign Ministry also stated:

Withdrawing from the INF treaty is another negative move of the US that ignores its international commitment and pursues unilateralism. Its real intention is to make the treaty no longer binding on itself so that it can unilaterally seek military and strategic edge.⁴²

With the demise of the treaty both Parties are now able to freely pursue the development, testing and deployment of a range of ground-

³⁸ In 2007 Russia put forward an initiative to expand the INF's obligations to other countries, specifically China. Although the idea was initially welcomed by the US, it was not supported more broadly by those states developing missile capabilities that would fall under the INF's purview. As such, the idea gained little diplomatic support, although many external commentators have viewed it as a potential route for getting multilateral arms control back on track.

³⁹ "INF Treaty crisis: background and next steps", Arms Control Association, 1 February 2019

⁴⁰ US Department of State, [US withdrawal from the INF treaty](#), 2 August 2019

⁴¹ [Foreign Ministry statement on the withdrawal of the United States from the INF Treaty and its termination](#), 2 August 2019

⁴² [Foreign Ministry Press Conference](#), 2 August 2019

launched intermediate-range missiles. Indeed, less than two weeks after the collapse of the treaty the US [conducted a test](#) of a ground-launched variant of the Tomahawk sea-launched cruise missile,⁴³ that would have been previously prohibited under the treaty. Observers suggested that the test “was a clear signal that the United States can and will pursue such systems in the absence of the INF treaty”.⁴⁴ A further test of an intermediate-range ballistic missile is scheduled for November 2019.

In response to the cruise missile test, Russia stated that the use of the MK-41 launcher vindicated its long-held belief that the MK-41’s deployment, as part of US missile defence in Europe, was a violation of the INF treaty. A position which the US had always refuted. President Putin confirmed that Government ministries had been instructed to “analyze the level of threat posed to our country by the...actions of the United States and take exhaustive measures for a reciprocal response”.⁴⁵

3.1 Implications for European security

While both sides have stated their intentions to develop and test new intermediate-range cruise missiles in the short term, they have both stated that they will not be the first to deploy such weapons in Europe. At a session of the State Duma on 18 June 2019, which passed legislation suspending the INF,⁴⁶ Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergey Ryabkov stated that “Moscow will not be the first to deploy intermediate-range missiles wherever it may be, until Washington makes this move”.⁴⁷ This position was reiterated by the Russian Foreign Ministry in its statement on the cessation of the INF on 2 August 2019⁴⁸ and again by President Putin in a speech on 5 September 2019.⁴⁹

At a meeting of NATO Defence Ministers on 26 June 2019, the Alliance confirmed that NATO “has no intention to deploy new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe”, that it will not “mirror what Russia does, and does not want a new arms race”.⁵⁰

However, both parties have also stated that they will respond to any escalation of the situation by the other side.

In a statement marking the formal withdrawal of the US from the INF treaty, Alliance leaders stated that “NATO will respond in a measured and responsible way to the significant risks posed by the Russian 9M729 missile to Allied security”, committing to a “balanced, coordinated and defensive package of measures to ensure NATO’s deterrence and defence posture remains credible and effective”.

⁴³ Using a MK-41 vertical launcher

⁴⁴ “US-Russian nuclear arms control watch”, Arms Control Association, 13 September 2019

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ The Upper House of the Russian Parliament passed the legislation on INF suspension on 26 June and President Putin signed it into law on 3 July 2019.

⁴⁷ <https://tass.com/politics/1064320>

⁴⁸ [Foreign Ministry statement on the withdrawal of the United States from the INF Treaty and its termination](#), 2 August 2019

⁴⁹ As reported by [CNBC](#), 5 September 2019

⁵⁰ [NATO’s position on the INF Treaty](#), 27 June 2019

Few details on those measures have been released, although in a [press conference](#) on 2 August NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg confirmed that NATO will “now work on issues such as exercises, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, air and missile defences, and conventional capabilities, while also ensuring that NATO's nuclear deterrent remains safe, secure and effective”. However, he went on to state that the Alliance will not “rush implementation or make any rash moves; we will consider our options carefully” and that “everything we do will be balanced, coordinated and defensive”.

He concluded by reiterating that:

We will not mirror what Russia does, we do not want a new arms race, and we have no intention to deploy new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe. NATO continues to aspire for a constructive relationship with Russia, when Russia's actions make that possible.

3.2 Future arms control

Such an outcome does not bode well for discussions on the extension or replacement of the New START treaty, which is due to lapse in 2021. For now, New START is the only remaining treaty placing checks on the nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia.

Indeed, in its statement on withdrawal from the INF treaty, the US State Department gave an indication of its intent going forward:

The United States remains committed to effective arms control that advances U.S., allied, and partner security; is verifiable and enforceable; and includes partners that comply responsibly with their obligations. President Trump has charged this Administration with beginning a new chapter by seeking a new era of arms control that moves beyond the bilateral treaties of the past. Going forward, the United States calls upon Russia and China to join us in this opportunity to deliver real security results to our nations and the entire world.

This call for a ‘grand bargain’ in arms control has been met with support, but also concern that it will allow the US administration to jettison New START while it pursues what is widely regarded as a politically unattainable goal, at least in the short term.

The conclusion of a new all-encompassing, multilateral, treaty would be complex and take years of discussion and negotiation, well beyond the expiration of New START in 2021. The proposal also assumes that Russia and China would agree to such an approach and that their list of demands would be equally amenable to the US. China has shown little interest in engaging in nuclear reductions given the disparity in the size of its nuclear forces (approximately 300), compared with the US and Russia (between 6,000 and 7,000).⁵¹ Discussions on limiting its missile capabilities is also widely considered unlikely, given its regional interests and in light of the recent suggestion by the US Defense Secretary of the

⁵¹ The nuclear weapon capabilities of each country is examined in Library Briefing Paper CBP7566, [Nuclear weapons: country comparisons](#)

16 Demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

intention to use the demise of the INF treaty as an opportunity to deploy US conventional (non-nuclear) intermediate-range missiles in Asia.⁵²

If New START is allowed to lapse, there will be no limitations on the arsenals of the world's two largest nuclear powers for the first time since 1972, prompting fears of a quantitative, as well as qualitative nuclear arms race.

The future of New START is examined in greater detail in Library Briefing Paper [CBP8421, Prospects for US-Russian nuclear arms control](#).

⁵² "Pentagon chief in favour of deploying missiles to Asia", *The New York Times*, 3 August 2019

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