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The INF Treaty—What It Means for the U.S., Russia, and China Today

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Abstract

On November 18, 2018, The Heritage Foundation's Peter Brookes addressed the Defense and Security Committee and the Science and Technology Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Brookes spoke to the audience about his personal views of the continuing difficulties with the INF Treaty (Russian non-compliance), and new threats (China's military build-up unconstrained by treaty restrictions). Brookes argues that the U.S. must address the Russian and Chinese challenges to international security from new and existing INF-range missiles.

Good morning! Thank you for having me here today to say a few words about the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—also known as the INF Treaty.

My plan this morning is to give some informal remarks on the treaty and its future, and then field some of your questions in the limited time we have together today.

The views I share today are mine and do not reflect the views of anyone else, including The Heritage Foundation.

I should also include that my comments are based on publicly available information, which may conflict with intelligence briefings that you may have received from your governments or other sources.

In terms of proceeding, I would like to say a few words about the treaty itself, follow that with my perception of some of the American concerns about the treaty—especially as it relates to Russia and China—and then conclude with the possible scenarios that surround the future of the treaty.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at **http://report.heritage.org/hl1301**

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Key Points

- The 1987 INF Treaty between the U.S. and Russia addressed conventional and nuclear weapons, but only restricted ground-based missile systems.
- There seems to be little disagreement in the U.S. and NATO about Russian non-compliance with the INF Treaty. By 2017, Russia had reportedly deployed at least one operational SSC-8 military battalion.
- Since China is not party to the INF Treaty, it is unconstrained by treaty restrictions—while the U.S. and, nominally, Russia, face a complete ban on INF-class missiles.
- As part of its unprecedented military build-up, China has already deployed one of the world's most significant conventional and nuclear ballistic and cruise missile arsenals. China's rise is of significant importance to U.S. national security and other interests in Asia.
- The U.S. has good reason to consider leaving the INF Treaty, and may have to do so to protect its interests and those of its allies and partners.

First, a little background about the INF Treaty. As you're aware, the bilateral INF Treaty was signed in 1987 by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev at the White House. It entered into force in mid-1988. The treaty prohibits the production, testing, and deployment of all ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 kilometers to 1,000 kilometers (shorter-range), and 1,000 kilometers to 5,500 kilometers (medium-range and intermediate-range). It also eliminated all missile launchers for this category of missiles.

It is worthwhile to note that the treaty addressed both conventional and nuclear weapons, but only restricted ground-based missile systems. It did not apply to sea-based or air-launched weapon systems.

The U.S. and Soviet Union had both destroyed the required weapons systems under the INF Treaty in their entirety by 1991—totaling some 2,600 missiles and launchers. Bilateral inspections on treaty issues in the United States and Russia ended in 2001. At the time, the INF Treaty was a noteworthy arms control agreement in that it eliminated—not just limited—an entire class of missiles: land-based shorter and intermediate-range, nuclear, conventional, and unconventional (such as chemical and biological) armed ballistic and cruise missiles, such as the American Pershing II and Soviet SS-20 missiles, of the time.

With war tensions between the United States and NATO on the one side, and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact on the other, this arms control treaty was considered a significant step toward reducing the threat of conflict in Europe. That steady state of affairs surrounding the INF Treaty began to markedly change for the worse in 2008 when concerns began to surface that Moscow had violated the treaty by developing a new missile system.

That troubling development came at the end of the second George W. Bush Administration and carried over into the Obama White House. While the Obama Administration attempted to "reset" relations with Russia and conclude another arms control agreement with Moscow—which came to be the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START)—concerns about Moscow's violations of the INF Treaty continued in Washington.

In 2014, the Obama State Department publicly called out Russia for its ongoing violations of the INF Treaty based on reports that it had tested a land-based cruise missile that came to be known as the 9M729 Novator or SSC-8. The new missile was believed to be a cruise-missile version of the Russian short-range ballistic missile, known as the Iskander.

Unfortunately, Washington's diplomatic efforts had no effect on Moscow's course of action in adhering to the arms control agreement. Indeed, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg commented this past October: "For over five years, the United States has pursued diplomatic and technical avenues with Russia aimed at preserving the INF Treaty."

So what are American concerns about Russia and the INF Treaty? Simply said: The first concern is that the Russians are violating it. From my perspective, a violation is unacceptable from a security, legal, and moral standpoint. From what I can glean, there seems to be little disagreement within the United States and NATO about Russian non-compliance with the INF Treaty.

Indeed, by last year, the Russians had not just tested, but reportedly deployed, at least one operational SSC-8 military battalion. I have seen reports in open sources that there are more deployed units. Each battalion reportedly has four launchers of six missiles each. If true, besides violating the treaty, this provides the Russians with an asymmetric military advantage over NATO forces in the European theater, undermining the Alliance's defense and deterrence posture.

Indeed, why would Russia go the expense of building a new weapons system if it didn't believe it provided Moscow with some sort of advantage over its potential foes, namely NATO?

I would suggest that with the SSC-8's expected range—which covers most of Europe—that this new missile significantly raises the military threat to NATO. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted: "[T]he 9M729 missile system poses a serious risk to the strategic stability of the Euro-Atlantic area."

Indeed, I would submit that the Russian missile program—beyond being a military threat—is also a challenge to the political unity of NATO. While this may not have been Moscow's intended effect, I believe the INF Treaty issue could provide Russia with the added benefit of straining the cohesiveness of the Alliance. Now, Moscow has admitted that it has been developing the 9M729 Novator missile, but seems to disagree with the U.S. and NATO position that the weapon system violates the INF Treaty.

The Russians also counter that the Americans are in violation of the INF Treaty themselves with the Aegis Ashore system for ballistic missile defense

that is deployed in Romania and will be deployed in Poland. Moscow claims that the Aegis Ashore system could be—I repeat, *could be*—outfitted with Tomahawk cruise missiles, which would violate the INF Treaty due to the missile's potential range.

This hypothetical charge, of course, is likely meant to distract from Russia's ongoing violation of the treaty. In my mind, the Russian violation of the INF Treaty is only half of the story regarding concerns from the American side about the arms control agreement.

The other problem with the INF Treaty, beyond Russia's violations of it, is China. Since America is a Pacific nation—not just an Atlantic nation—China's rise is of significant importance to U.S. national security and other interests in Asia—and, arguably, beyond.

As you know, Beijing is not party to the U.S.–Russia INF Treaty. As such, Beijing is not constrained by any of the arms control restrictions set forth on the cruise and ballistic missiles in the INF agreement—while Russia and the United States face a complete ban on INF-class missiles.

Indeed, as part of its unprecedented military build-up, China has developed and deployed one of the world's most significant conventional and nuclear ballistic and cruise missile arsenals. Former U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Harry Harris said in congressional testimony in 2017 that China has "the largest and most diverse missile force in the world, with an inventory of more than 2,000 ballistic and cruise missiles." He continued: "This fact is significant because the United States has no comparable capability due to our adherence to the INF Treaty with Russia." Admiral Harris added that 95 percent of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Rocket Force's ballistic and cruise missiles would violate the INF Treaty if Beijing were party to it.

Today, China has the world's second-largest military budget and is involved in a significant build-up and modernization of the People's Liberation Army military, which supports an anti-access/area-denial strategy largely focused on U.S. forces in the Pacific.

China is developing a world-class military and its military build-up—in some cases—threatens important American interests in the Pacific. A bright-line example is the Chinese militarization and claims of sovereignty over much of the South China Sea, through which more than an estimated $3 trillion in trade transits annually. Indeed, the South China Sea may account for some 20 percent of global trade, according to some research.

Of concern are the reports that Beijing has placed anti-ship cruise missiles on several of its artificial islands in the South China Sea. These missiles may exceed INF-banned ranges.

Beyond the South China Sea, Taiwan, North Korea, and the security of U.S. allies and partners in Asia are also important.

As challenges arise in the Pacific involving China, and potentially North Korea, the INF Treaty prevents the United States from freely developing and deploying—if it so chooses—U.S. military capabilities to the fullest extent possible. This situation has a potentially direct effect on America's ability to shape Chinese behavior and resist its assertiveness in the Indo–Pacific region.

Lastly, I can't help but feel that the Russians must have concerns about growing Chinese military strength, considering their past history, political ambitions, and geographic proximity.

Let me say a few words about the possible Russian reaction to a possible American withdrawal from the INF Treaty. One of those concerns is the possibility of "arms racing" with the United States and NATO, which Russia has threatened publicly. While these Russian comments about an arms race may be intended to influence public opinion in Europe and the United States most of all, an arms race is certainly a possibility and a reasonable concern.

That said, I believe it is unlikely.

First, I believe the Russians would have a hard time increasing defense spending considering low global energy prices, the anemic state of the Russian economy, Western economic sanctions on Russia, and domestic pressures over spending at home.

Moreover, Russian defense spending reportedly decreased in real terms in 2017 after years of growth. Some experts believe that Russian defense spending is expected to decrease as a percentage of GDP [gross domestic product] in the coming years due to limited economic growth projections.

In addition, Russia would be facing NATO and European Union countries, many of which are increasing their defense spending largely in response to Russian belligerence in Europe. Moscow's efforts to match Western defense spending—while involved in military adventurism in both Ukraine and Syria—would be challenging in my view.

Another hint that the Russians are not interested in arms racing is that Moscow has attempted to preserve the INF Treaty with its recent diplomatic

efforts at the U.N. Security Council, which so far has been rejected. I also sense that Russians are concerned about a renewal of the New START Treaty in 2021, and may not want to jeopardize that possibility with the United States.

Indeed, at the moment, the Russian response is reportedly predicated on the U.S. deploying INF missiles to Europe, which is unlikely in the short term due to a number of reasons, including political controversy in Europe involving such a deployment and the lack of American missiles with that range. The United States just doesn't have any land-based INF-range missile systems currently.

Now that Moscow understands the possible consequences of its actions, it could also come back into compliance with the INF Treaty. Possibly to this end, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly met at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore this week and discussed the INF Treaty and New START.

What about a Chinese reaction to an American withdrawal from the INF Treaty? Beijing has expressed its view—not surprisingly—that Washington should not leave the INF Treaty. It encourages the two sides to work out their differences in an effort to maintain the treaty that restricts American and Russian missile arsenals.

As such, it's my view that China is both very unlikely to sign on to the existing INF Treaty—whether Russia is compliant or not—or any negotiated expansion of the INF Treaty that might include Beijing. Doing so would diminish its missile muscle in the region that threatens U.S. allies, partners, and interests as well as undermine any asymmetric missile advantage it also has over its neighbor Russia on this class of missile.

In my view, the Russians and Chinese are not natural allies, despite their efforts to promote a united front as "strategic partners" to advance a multipolar world, counterbalance the United States, and thwart the West.

Feeling pressured to consider joining the treaty, Beijing has said it will not be "blackmailed" into entering an arms control agreement on its "defensive" INF-class ballistic and cruise missiles.

In conclusion, it is not clear as I speak if the United States will actually leave the INF Treaty. My reading of the treaty is that Washington would have to provide Moscow with six months' notice before leaving the treaty officially. To my knowledge, that has not been officially done, though there have been plenty of informal communications. To my knowledge the Trump Administration has not formally provided notice to Russia that it is leaving the INF Treaty due to the jeopardy placed on its "supreme interests." Of course, a U.S. diplomatic note to this effect may be in the works in Washington.

The United States seems open to some renegotiation of the current agreement or an expanded treaty that might include other parties, but that may not be possible for the reasons I have noted. All of that being said, if current conditions prevail, Washington's withdrawal seems quite possible at some point. The United States, in my opinion, certainly has solid reasons to get out of the INF Treaty based on existing circumstances.

It would be both risky and unsound for the U.S. and NATO to ignore concerns over Russia's violations of the INF Treaty, which threatens Europe with a new class of cruise missile. As Secretary General Stoltenberg said at the NATO–Russia Council meeting this October, "we [NATO] are also committed to take effective measures to continue to ensure the safety and security of all Allies."

I also do not believe that ignoring Russian violations to stay in the INF Treaty will "moderate" Russian behavior, considering past—and present—actions by Moscow. Russia presents a significant challenge on a number of fronts, as this audience is well aware. While far from Europe and most NATO countries, it would also be risky and unsound for the United States to ignore concerns about China and its large missile arsenal, which threaten U.S. forces and interests in Asia with Beijing's growing power projection capabilities and geopolitical ambitions.

These developments involving Russia and China must be answered in some fashion. Of course, not acting is an option. But while there is risk in acting, there is also risk in *not* acting. Failing to respond to Russia in an effective manner would create, in my opinion, a "moral hazard," a situation that would increase the likelihood of additional bad behavior in Europe on the part of Moscow. Likewise, failing to react to China in an effective manner on the missile issue would potentially create a vulnerability that could be destabilizing to American defense and deterrence in the Pacific.

I think President Trump summed up the Administration's position well when he said recently that: "Unless Russia comes to us and China comes to us and say, let's get really smart and let's none of us develop these weapons, but if Russia's doing it and

China's doing it and we're adhering to the agreement, that's unacceptable."

Unfortunately, based on current security conditions as relates to Russia and China, in my view, the United States is justifiably calling into question the INF Treaty. Some might even argue that an American response is long overdue. Without changes in the international security environment, regrettably, Washington has good reason to consider leaving the INF Treaty—and may very well have to do so to protect its interests and those of its allies and partners.

We can—and we certainly should—debate the future of the INF Treaty. But, in my opinion, something must also be done that addresses the Russian and Chinese challenges to international security from new and existing INF-range missiles.

Thank you very much.

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