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Time to Withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

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The Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which bans ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 300 to 3,400 miles, launchers, and associated and support equipment, no longer serves the national security interests of the United States and its allies. For years, another party to the INF Treaty, the Russian Federation, has been developing capabilities banned by the treaty. Today, the United States is the only party in compliance. In light of the Russian violations and changing geopolitical conditions, the Administration should withdraw from the treaty.

Fool Me Once...

In 2014, the U.S. Department of State officially accused Russia of violating the INF Treaty. However, as early as 2008, Moscow tested a prohibited missile, and it has since deployed that missile in a clear escalation of its violations.¹

The previous Administration's efforts to bring Russia back into compliance with the treaty were meager: writing a letter to President Vladimir Putin, raising the issue with Russian counterparts, and directing the Pentagon to develop hypothetical responses to these violations. The last effort was largely the result of congressional pressure follow-

ing the Administration's inaction, and none of these actions fundamentally altered Russia's calculated effort to develop the prohibited class of systems. The attempt to bring Moscow into compliance was utterly unsuccessful.

This is not the first time the United States has raised compliance concerns related to the INF Treaty. The U.S. discovered that the Soviet Union had transferred a number of soon-to-be-banned missiles to the former German Democratic Republic, former Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria just before the treaty entered into force in 1988. It took until 2004 and required significant levels of U.S. assistance to destroy the last of these missiles.²

In fact, Russia has violated almost all agreements it has ever signed with the United States, including the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) regarding short-range nuclear weapons; the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty; and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Historically, Washington's efforts to bring Russia back into compliance have been unsuccessful, while the United States has had to pay the price of unilateral restraint: forestalling consideration of any options that banned systems might offer to advance U.S. national security in a changing geopolitical environment, sluggish tit-for-tat response capability, and a lack of political will to address violations, prompted by a fear of undermining treaties.

When the United States did succeed in bringing Russia back into compliance with treaties—for example, in the case of Russia's Cold War violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty—compliance was driven by changes in geopolitical context more than by U.S. actions. Such a geopolitical

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change is unlikely today. The INF Treaty itself was negotiated while the United States was deploying intermediate-range ballistic missiles to Europe in a show of political unity in the face of the Soviet threat.

Prudential Considerations

The INF Treaty was an important sign of political unity for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the face of the awesome Soviet political and military threat. It was the first arms control treaty to eliminate (not just cap) a whole class of nuclear arms and set an important precedent for relatively intrusive verification procedures. Today, in the context of Russia's disregard of the treaty, U.S. options for developing intermediate-range systems are severely restricted, as is U.S. thinking about whether it would be beneficial to incorporate these systems into the current defense posture (for example, to counter potential Chinese and rogue state threats).

While some argue that the United States should preserve the treaty despite Russian violations, Russia is incorporating intermediate-range systems into its forces regardless of U.S. concerns. The treaty is creating an asymmetry between the thinking and capability of the Russian forces and those of the United States. Therefore, the United States has little to lose and much to gain by withdrawing from the treaty.

It is unlikely that a U.S. withdrawal would have the disastrous consequences envisioned by proponents of the Treaty. Similar warnings were issued before the U.S. withdrew from the ABM Treaty, yet today the United States is better off and is building and deploying ballistic missile defense systems designed to counter a limited ballistic missile threat from North Korea and Iran. Experience shows that allies will follow U.S. leadership, particularly when their own security is at stake.

Next Steps

To advance U.S. security goals and give military planners space to think through the implications and benefits of intermediate-range systems in different scenarios, the Trump Administration should:

- **Consult with allies in Europe in preparation for U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty.** In the event of a U.S. withdrawal from the treaty, Russia would likely wage an information campaign blaming the U.S. for the treaty's demise. It would be essential to remind audiences in the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world that years of Russian violations, not U.S. actions, were the true cause of the treaty's demise. The NATO alliance must show unity in the face of expected Russian disinformation efforts.
- **Sanction Russian individuals and organizations involved in Russia's intermediate-range nuclear forces program and those making nuclear threats against U.S. allies.** The United States can implement selective sanctions against specifically defined persons and organizations involved in the intermediate-range nuclear forces program, as well as those making nuclear threats against U.S. allies. Such sanctions would have a more symbolic than practical effect and would communicate U.S. unwillingness to let Russia get away with violating the INF Treaty.
- **Withdraw from the INF Treaty.** The Administration should not shy away from withdrawing from, or at least suspending operation of, the INF Treaty. Withdrawal would not significantly affect international security, because Russia already behaves as if the treaty were not in force. In fact, withdrawal could even improve security as the United States could develop potentially useful intermediate-range ballistic missile options.
- **Continue to develop and deploy ballistic missile defense systems.** The United States should begin by improving its radar and tracking capabilities to ensure timely detection of an intermediate-range system aimed at a NATO member. The Administration, in concurrence with Congress, should increase missile defense funding and continue to develop and improve a layered, comprehensive missile defense system capable of shooting down intermediate-range systems,

1. Michaela Dodge, "Moscow Issues Its First Nuclear Challenge to Trump," The Daily Signal, February 15, 2017, http://dailysignal.com/2017/02/15/moscow-issues-its-first-nuclear-challenge-to-trump/?_ga=1.207572435.174428901.1489761991.

2. U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, August 2005, p. 9. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/52113.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2017).

including salvo launches of those quantities of which Russia is capable.³

- **Revitalize America’s tactical nuclear weapons program and thinking.** The United States should use its leadership within NATO to reinvigorate outreach to senior leaders within the Alliance and educate them on nuclear matters. It should hold exercises that simulate responses to a hypothetical Russian tactical nuclear weapons attack as simulated in Russia’s Zapad military exercises.

Conclusion

In light of international security concerns amid repeated Russian violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Administration should reevaluate American compliance with the treaty. Beginning with sanctions against those involved in the Russian intermediate-range forces program and against Russians who threaten a NATO ally with nuclear attack, the U.S. should suspend or withdraw altogether from the treaty.

The Trump Administration should continue to evaluate the benefits of developing U.S. intermediate-range ballistic missile capabilities. Additionally, it should improve radar and tracking capabilities, increase missile defense funding, and hold exercises that simulate hypothetical Russian tactical nuclear weapons attacks.

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3. Michaela Dodge, “Russian Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces: What They Mean for the United States,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3028, July 30, 2015, http://www.heritage.org/europe/report/russian-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-what-they-mean-the-united-states?_ga=1.240121155.1938467572.1490290541.