

Russian Security Agreement Violations Raise Concerns About Future Pacts with Moscow

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Given Moscow's troubling record, some U.S. policymakers should be concerned about renewing, extending, or creating international security agreements with Russia.

The Trump Administration and Congress should base any future security pacts on U.S. interests, and ensure that Moscow understands the consequences of noncompliance.

Washington should work to educate Americans and U.S. allies on Russia's behavior, while pushing allies and partners to press Russia to comply with its agreements.

U.S. representatives recently met with Russian counterparts in Vienna to discuss the future of arms control, including the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which expires in February 2021.

The backdrop to these discussions is Russia's poor performance on bilateral and multilateral arms control treaties, and on confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) agreements.

Based on Moscow's troubling compliance record, some U.S. policymakers and analysts are understandably concerned about proceeding with renewing, extending, or creating any new international security agreements with Russia.

With this in mind, the Trump Administration and Congress should base any future security pacts with Russia firmly on U.S. national interests and ensure that Moscow understands

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that underperformance or nonperformance on security pacts has consequences.

In addition, Washington should launch a campaign to educate Congress, the U.S. public, allies, and other key constituencies on Russian security agreement issues while pushing allies, friends, and partners to press Russia to comply with all security agreements that it has signed.

Russia's Recent Record

Moscow's failure to comply with a number of international bilateral and multilateral security agreements should be of concern, especially when viewed in the aggregate rather than individually. Russia's recent non-compliance with no fewer than four major arms control and CSBM agreements paints a problematic pattern that should concern not only the United States but the international system.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

In 2019, the United States declared the Russian Federation in material breach of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, an historic agreement signed by President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.

The bilateral treaty forbids the parties to “possess, produce, or flight-test a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) with a range capability of 500 kilometers (km) to 5,500 kilometers, or to possess or produce launchers of such missiles.”¹

Moscow was found to have not only tested, but starting in 2017, also deployed the SSC-8 (NATO name: SCREWDRIVER), known in the Russian missile inventory as the 9M729.² Whether a conventional or nuclear-capable system, the missile violates the INF Treaty.

As a result, the United States left the treaty in August 2019.

The Open Skies Treaty

Going back a decade now, Russia has been deliberately violating the 34-nation CSBM Open Skies Treaty (OST), which allows unarmed aerial observation flights over member states' territory in the interest of military transparency.

In contravention of the OST, in 2010, Moscow started preventing OST observation flights from approaching to within 10 kilometers of Russia's

border with the Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, considering the Russian-occupied territories to be independent states.³

The Kremlin also restricts OST flights to 500 kilometers in length over the highly militarized Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, located between NATO members Lithuania and Poland on the Baltic Sea.⁴ Such sub-limits are not allowed under OST.

In addition, last September, Moscow denied a request for a U.S.–Canada OST flight over the Russian Tsentr-2019 strategic-level exercises; the military drills included China and others and involved upwards of 120,000 troops.⁵

Due to these issues, Washington announced its withdrawal from the pact in May 2020.

Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe

Concluded near the end of the Cold War, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) was purposed with providing stability in Europe by balancing NATO and Warsaw Pact armaments, supported by information exchanges, notifications, and on-site inspections.

In 2007, Russia suspended participation in the CFE treaty because of a disagreement about the presence of its armed forces in Moldova and Georgia. Since then, of particular concern are large-scale, Russian no-notice (or “snap”) military exercises that undermine the purposes of the CFE treaty and the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Vienna Document on CSBMs.⁶ More seriously, these unannounced military drills might “mask impending aggression,” as seen in Russia’s conflict with Georgia in 2008.⁷

Moreover, of long concern and outside the CFE treaty, Russia continues to station its forces on the territories of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine without the host countries’ consent, which many correctly recognize as a Russian occupation.⁸

In response to Russian violations, the United States has ceased the implementation of some its CFE obligations.⁹

Chemical Weapons Convention

The United States also considers Russia to be in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) for its use of the military-grade nerve agent “Novichok” in a 2018 assassination attempt in the United Kingdom of a former GRU (Russia’s military intelligence directorate) officer, Russian

assistance to a Syrian chemical weapon attack, and an offensive pharmaceutical-based program.¹⁰

This attack, using an advanced, highly lethal nerve agent, demonstrates that Russia retains an active, undeclared chemical weapons program, which may include chemical weapons production facilities, research and development, and stockpiles.¹¹

The United States is in compliance with the CWC. Washington is also disquieted by Moscow's noncompliance with, or non-adherence to, its political commitments and legal obligations under, a number of other international bilateral and multilateral security agreements.

The bilateral U.S.–Russia treaty on the Limitation of Underground Nuclear Weapons Tests, also known as the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT), limits nuclear-related scientific experiments that produce a nuclear yield. The U.S. government currently contends that Russia has violated the TTBT as far back as 1995.¹²

The United States also has concerns about whether Russia is complying with the multilateral Biological Weapons Convention.¹³ Having inherited the Soviet-era offensive biological weapons program, Moscow has not provided sufficient transparency to prove that it has diverted the previous offensive program entirely to defensive or peaceful purposes.¹⁴

Moscow also frequently violates the commitments agreed to in the Vienna Document. Russia's "selective implementation" of the Vienna Document on conventional forces undermines its purpose.¹⁵ In essence, Russia has arguably deconstructed all European conventional arms control agreements.¹⁶

Lastly, questions exist about the Kremlin's adherence to the bilateral 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives Concerning Tactical Nuclear Weapons. This voluntary, unilateral agreement was meant to reduce the number of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁷ As such, Russian armed forces likely retain a significant non-strategic nuclear weapons capability for coercive diplomacy as well as warfighting purposes.

These expansive transgressions of bilateral and multilateral treaties and agreements with the United States and others are in addition to Russia's broader, belligerent international adventurism in Afghanistan, Georgia, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine.

Recommendations for Washington

In order to address concerns about Russia and international security agreements, the Trump Administration, supported by Congress, should:

- **Base future U.S.–Russian security agreements firmly on American national interests.** International security agreements do not have intrinsic value per se; instead, their worth is based on how they serve the national interest. Pursuing and concluding security agreements should not be based on achieving agreement for the sake of agreement, but on what makes America safer. Likewise, undertaking high-level, “feel good” treaty-making for the purposes of engaging an adversary—without substantively advancing American interests—should be viewed with deep policy skepticism.
- **Ensure that Russia understands that pact noncompliance has consequences.** The Trump Administration rightly withdrew from the INF Treaty and is leaving the OST due to Russia’s long-standing and egregious violations. These decisive moves on the part of the Administration should be commended. Moscow must understand that Washington will not allow Russia to violate international security agreements without repercussions, nor can Washington enter into new ones without reservations. To do so would only encourage more bad behavior by Russia.
- **Launch an information campaign about Russia’s noncompliance with, and non-adherence to, security agreements.** The State Department produces an annual written report to Congress, known as the “Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments.” While it is a comprehensive report, it could arguably be supplemented by a more robust educational and public diplomacy campaign on Russian security agreement compliance with, and adherence to, key constituencies, including Congress, the U.S. public, allies, and partners and friends and their citizenries. Undertaking such an effort could build political solidarity as well as undermine Russian widespread disinformation campaigns.
- **Push allies, friends, and partners to press Russia to comply with existing agreements.** Without question, some arms control and CSBMs serve the national interest—but only when all parties fully comply. As evidenced, Russia is a frequent outlier to compliance, which can undermine international peace, security, and stability. American allies, friends, and partners must use their influence to increase Moscow’s compliance and adherence—which is also in many of these actors’ national interest.

Conclusion

Reasons clearly exist to be wary of engaging Russia in arms control and CSBM agreements. This caution over Soviet and Russian intentions is not new. Indeed, according to a new great-power competition study, “Evidence suggests that the Soviets viewed arms control as an instrument of competition to lock in asymmetric advantages that they possessed.”¹⁸

Even today, a State Department study finds: “Putin’s Russia seems again to be willing to ignore its own arms control agreements in service of the Kremlin’s dreams of power.”¹⁹

In fact, it might be concluded that the Kremlin sees compliance with international security agreements as optional in the 21st century, as it moves to advance its self-perceived national interest as a great power in the international system.²⁰

These misguided Russian approaches to security undermine the goals of stability, predictability, and mutual benefit that these international security pacts seek to offer through cooperation, coordination, transparency, and understanding.

As such, the United States is right to enter into—and exit from—arms control and other security agreements with Russia based on past, and expected future, performance. These decisions must always be based on whether these pacts advance, or detract from, the national interest of the United States.

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Endnotes

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