



Is This the End of Nuclear Arms Control?

Malcolm Chalmers and Dmitry Stefanovich

The articles below were informed by a roundtable discussion in London in October 2018 between the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and RUSI to discuss the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. While the discussion revealed some differences in perspective, it was agreed that expert dialogue can play an important role in informing the policy positions of all governments concerned.

Malcolm Chalmers: RUSI's Deputy Director-General

With US President Donald Trump's decision to pull out of the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#), the nuclear arms control architecture between the US and Russia now faces its most severe crisis since the 1980s, and risks collapsing altogether. Although the UK and other European states are not direct participants in US–Russia treaties, the end of arms control could have especially severe implications for European security.

The immediate and understandable trigger for the US decision is that Russia has tested, and is beginning to deploy, a new ground-based cruise missile, [the 9M729](#) (also known as SSC-8 within the US and NATO), with characteristics (including range) that are in clear breach of the treaty. Despite being made aware of US concerns for more than four years, Moscow has failed to address them seriously.

Far from putting Russia on the defensive, however, the US's decision has been used by Moscow as an opportunity to secure a propaganda advantage, portraying itself as a defender of the Treaty while blaming the US for its collapse. For more than a decade, Russian President Vladimir Putin has argued that Russian military power is unfairly limited by the INF Treaty. The treaty places no constraint on neighbouring nuclear powers – including China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and, potentially, Iran – who are deploying INF missiles of their own without any treaty limitation. Russia's

use of sea-based medium-range missiles in the Syrian war has shown that such weapons can play a valuable role in conventional conflicts around Russia's perimeter – and that may have reinforced the desire of Russia's ground forces for a similar capability. Importantly, Putin and many others in the Russian leadership see the INF Treaty as an unequal treaty (mainly judging by the numbers of destroyed missiles), a result of former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's alleged belief in unbalanced concessions towards the West.

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This sense of unfairness has been deepened by the US's reluctance to take seriously Russian INF-related concerns, namely ground-based missile interceptor launchers in eastern Europe, sophisticated target missiles that resemble 'rogue' IRBMs, and increasing deployment of medium-range Reaper armed drones. While none of these US systems are in breach of the INF Treaty, their deployment, together with the US handling of Russian concerns, strengthened the Russian perception that the treaty was fundamentally unfair.

The end of the INF Treaty will allow both Russia and the US to deploy systems that are currently prohibited. Russia is likely to be first to do so, given the advanced stage of its land-based missile forces modernisation programme. Over time, there could be pressure on the US to follow suit. Like its Russian counterpart, elements in the US Army have bridled at the restrictions imposed on them by the treaty. Proposals are already being developed for [new ground-based hypersonic missiles](#) and long-range cannons, allowing the US Army to reach deep behind Russian or Chinese lines with conventional strikes without support of the US Air Force or Navy, while exploiting the existing loopholes in the treaty text.

It will not be easy for the US to find places to site these new missiles. Most European governments, remembering the controversies of the 1980s, will reject any suggestion of future INF deployments on their territory. More likely, the main priority for new US missile deployments will be in Asia, adding to the build-up of conventional forces devoted to containing China.

If the INF Treaty does disappear, the damage will not be limited to the consequent deployment of once-prohibited systems by Russia and the US. Over time, a breakdown of the treaty is also likely to spur new deployments of anti-missile defences, both in Europe and Asia. Current deployments of US missile interceptors in Poland and Romania are designed primarily for defence against INF-range missiles coming from the Middle East. Growing deployment of Russian INF

Soviet inspectors and their American escorts stand among several dismantled Pershing II missiles, January 1989. The destructions were carried out in accordance with the INF Treaty that came into effect the year prior. *Courtesy of Wikimedia*



missiles aimed at Europe, however, would likely prompt consideration of new NATO missile defences openly oriented towards the east. Practical and economic constraints might limit the pace of this action/reaction process. But the cumulative effect could be to contribute to a remilitarisation of Europe to levels not seen for more than two decades.

Perhaps the greatest risk in the short term will be to the New START Treaty between the US and Russia. This treaty, which caps the long-range nuclear arsenals of both countries, is due to expire in February 2021, although it can be extended by up to five years by agreement. Ratification of the treaty in 2010 was opposed in the US by most Republican senators at the time, with President Barack Obama obliged to pledge considerable new spending on nuclear modernisation to

gain the required two-thirds majority. Given the much worse state of relations with Russia today, compared to 2010, there would be broad support within his own party if President Trump were to announce that he would not support renewal of New START without substantial further Russian concessions. If the New START Treaty were also to disappear, the world would be left without any constraints on, or transparency over, nuclear arsenals for the first time since 1972.

Such developments would, to say the least, not create the most propitious circumstances in which to hold the next Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), scheduled to take place in 2020. Since the NPT entered force in 1970, non-nuclear states have repeatedly expressed their frustration at the pace

of disarmament by the five recognised nuclear powers. Most recently, this frustration has been expressed through strong support among many states for the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty, despite strong opposition from the US and its allies. For four decades, however, nuclear states have at least been able to argue that they are moving in the right direction, albeit not as quickly as others would like.

If existing treaties were to disappear, however, not only would the process of further Russian and American reductions come to a halt. There would also be less information on what the two nuclear superpowers actually have. Other nuclear powers – China, India, Pakistan and now North Korea – would likely continue building up their own arsenals, perhaps even accelerating this process in response to new US and Russian deployments.

A Response from Dmitry Stefanovich of RIAC

The INF Treaty is rapidly approaching its grim end. It seems that 30 years is the ‘shelf life’ for arms control agreements – the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty* could not survive this watershed either. Yet there is little doubt that if the INF Treaty dies, the world will become an even less secure place.

Although the Russian authorities have previously expressed their sentiments about the unfairness of the treaty, over the last several years the mainstream official Russian narrative has been that this document remains one of the cornerstones of US–Russian strategic stability, especially within the European theatre, and is very important on a global scale. It is also worth noting that both NATO and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have made statements supporting the treaty.

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It is important to emphasise that it remains unclear whether the deployed Russian 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile does indeed violate the INF Treaty. There may have been a series of mistakes made by both the Russian military, design bureaus and industry as well as US intelligence during the development stages of this weapon system. These errors may have been corrected to ensure compliance, but were nevertheless used by the US as a tool in its overall ‘countering Russia’ activities.

Regarding the latest US announcement of its intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has

offered an important revelation. The ‘questionnaire’ with detailed information regarding the time and place of the events that made the US intelligence community conclude that Russia violated the INF Treaty was presented just a few days before the US’s intention to pull out was leaked. There is no information on how Russia will handle the INF dispute now. But, as a starting point, it may be a good idea for the Russian authorities to take the lead and demonstrate the 9M729 missile to the general public and expert community.

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Another notable statement came from Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, who said that information regarding the 9M729 test launches was sent to the US, and that there was a 9M729 launch during the *Zapad-2017* exercises (the large-scale military manoeuvres held last year in Russia and Belarus) on a distance considerably shorter than INF-watershed 500km. However, it is unclear precisely what data was sent to the US, and whether it included the missile’s launch during the *Zapad-2017* exercises. According to publicly available information, there were only two Iskander-M-related events during that exercise. Firstly, the ‘quasiballistic’ (probably 9M723) missile went all the way to Kazakhstan from the Kapustin Yar range in Russia’s Astrakhan region, traveling a maximum distance of 480km. Secondly, the cruise missile that may be identified as a 9M729 was launched at the Luzhsky artillery range in the Leningrad region – a large venue, but not large enough for INF-violating distances, although any intermediate-range ground-launched

cruise missiles are obviously capable of hitting closer targets.

So, what will happen if the INF Treaty is destroyed? Much is made of the possibility that Russia may be the first party to deploy intermediate-range missiles there. Yet a few points should be made in this regard.

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Russian land-based missiles are one of the country’s major areas of military-scientific and industrial excellence, so Russian sub-strategic missiles getting the ‘pole position’ in a future Russian defence strategy is indeed a viable scenario. However, for propaganda and political purposes, the Russian authorities may exercise some initial restraint, at least in terms of the siting, targeting and payload of any potential INF deployments. This unilateral measure of restraint may be followed by bilateral and multilateral arrangements to minimise the mutual threat of inadvertent escalation.

The prospects for the extension of the New START agreement in the absence of the INF Treaty may lead to several outcomes that appear rather similar from the Russian and US perspectives. True, such a scenario may serve to reinforce perceptions on both sides that the other is an unreliable partner. Yet at the same time, the absence of mutual accusations over alleged INF violations – since the treaty would no longer exist – may lead to a healthier bilateral environment, at least over arms control issues. However, for this to happen Washington must first thoroughly address several concerns voiced by Moscow regarding procedures undertaken to verifiably reduce US numbers of nuclear launchers within the scope of the New START, for a failure to do so will lead to further diminution in Russia’s belief that the two countries can have mutually beneficial agreements.

Chalmers and Stefanovich: A Joint Conclusion

Should there be sufficient political will, it is still possible that both sides may uncover some new options for arms control, with the aim of upgrading and updating the principles of New START and the INF Treaty. Russia and the US could also take new unilateral confidence-building and even arms reduction initiatives.

Given the deeply damaging potential consequences of the demise of the INF Treaty, is there anything that can still be done to prevent its death? Political leaders in both Moscow and Washington appear more interested in winning the war of words than finding a way to resolve their dispute. If this were to change, however, arms control experts from both the West and Russia have identified a menu of confidence-building steps that could begin to address the concerns of both sides, buying time for diplomacy to prevail. These steps might include, for example, voluntary freezes on deployment of controversial systems, increased information exchange and one-off inspections. Russian and American leaders could also work to develop a longer-term solution that may re-animate the INF Treaty, but

also address new security concerns that could not have been foreseen when the treaty was first agreed three decades ago, perhaps by adding new protocols to the text. In case both sides decide that they need new intermediate-range systems for conventional warfighting, they could provide verifiable assurances that the disputed missiles have no nuclear capability. Other measures might include technical changes in the configuration of contested systems, for example in relation to the use of range-enhancing fuel tanks, the different effects that nuclear and conventional warheads have on range, and potential offensive capabilities for ground-based interceptor launchers. Emerging technologies that play on the margins of the INF Treaty definitions (hypersonic gliders, aeroballistic missiles, boosted warheads and others) might also have to be addressed in some form.

It is important not to be naïve – the prospects are not good. Yet the negative consequences for European – and global – security are such that one last push towards saving the INF Treaty (or at least its legacy) could still be worthwhile. Otherwise, a further, and even more dangerous, twist in the spiral of mutual distrust between Russia and the West may be inevitable.

* Note that the title of the official treaty only mentions the delivery vehicles, not the nuclear payload – it is called the ‘Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the elimination of their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles’.

Malcolm Chalmers

Malcolm is the Deputy Director-General of RUSI.

Dmitry Stefanovich

Dmitry is an independent military-political affairs analyst and a RIAC expert. His main areas of study are strategic stability, nuclear weapons and delivery systems, disruptive technologies and regional security dynamics.

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