



Is Trump right to nuke the INF Treaty?

by Ian Bond

2 November 2018

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty is a cornerstone of European stability. The US should challenge Russian treaty violations, but not abandon the treaty without a better plan.

Donald Trump's announcement on October 20th that the US would withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was typical of his erratic approach to policy. In seemingly impromptu [remarks](#) to reporters at the end of a campaign rally in Nevada, Trump said of the treaty: "We're going to terminate the agreement and we're going to pull out".

Though the US had been concerned for some years that Russia was violating the agreement, the timing of Trump's comments came as a surprise to US allies in Europe, for whom the treaty has been an important stabilising instrument for over 30 years. The treaty, signed in 1987 by US president Ronald Reagan and the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, eliminated a whole class of weapons that Europeans found particularly threatening: Soviet intermediate-range missiles were capable of reaching European targets quickly and striking accurately. The Soviet Union's willingness to give up this capability was an important sign that Gorbachev was serious about reducing tension in Europe. Without it, there will be fewer constraints on Putin's newly assertive Russia.

Trump did not say exactly when the US would withdraw – and as with his abrupt reversal of course on [North Korea](#), he could still change his mind. On the other hand, Trump's National Security Adviser, John Bolton, is a long-standing opponent of arms control treaties, which he regards as constraining the US's total freedom of action in its own defence, and will no doubt work to keep Trump on the current path. The INF treaty gives each party the right to withdraw "if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests". It has to give six months' notice, and state what the "extraordinary events" are. Bolton was keen to [underline](#) on a visit to Moscow on October 23rd that the US was not interested in using the time to revive the treaty, describing it as "outdated, outmoded and ignored by other countries".

The US is likely to say that the "extraordinary events" centre on Russia's testing and deployment of a new ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) known in Russia as the 9M729 and to NATO as the SSC-8. The

US has had concerns about this missile for a decade, according to a [report](#) from the US Congressional Research Service, and [went public](#) with the allegation of a treaty breach in July 2014. The Russians have consistently denied that they are doing anything wrong and have in turn accused the US of breaching the treaty. In view of Russia's failure to halt the missile programme or address US concerns, the US has now raised the temperature.

In addition to complaints about Russia, however, Trump and Bolton also pointed to US concern that China is not a party to the treaty and has itself been developing intermediate-range systems of a kind that the US and Russia are prohibited from testing or deploying. Trump said in Nevada: "But if Russia is doing it and if China is doing it, and we're adhering to the agreement, that's unacceptable".

If Trump wants to withdraw from the treaty in order to deploy INF-violating systems near China, that is likely to cause tension with European allies: they may legitimately ask why their security should be harmed so that the US can have the right to develop systems for deployment in Asia. America has handled the issue awkwardly with NATO allies from the beginning. The intelligence on the Russian treaty violations is extremely sensitive; some of it may not have been shared even with America's closest partners. The US message to allies prior to Trump's announcement was effectively: "Trust us, and please support us publicly".

The allied response has been cautious: in December 2017, more than three years after the US first said unequivocally that Russia was violating the treaty, a NATO statement said only that allies had "identified a Russian missile system that raises serious concerns". The NATO summit in July 2018 went further, stating that allies believed that "in the absence of any credible answer from Russia on this new missile, the most plausible assessment would be that Russia is in violation of the treaty".

Now NATO is struggling to preserve a façade of unity. The US defence secretary, James Mattis, asked European allies at a meeting in Brussels on October 3rd-4th to come up with ideas to deal with Russia's violation of the treaty, but without suggesting that Trump was on the point of deciding to withdraw from it; he has subsequently said that no-one has proposed any new ideas. After Trump's announcement, [France](#) and [Germany](#) both made statements balancing criticism of Russia with calls on the US not to terminate the treaty. Britain's defence secretary, [Gavin Williamson](#), was more supportive of the US – though even he also said that the UK wanted the treaty to remain in force. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg took a similar line.

Whether or not the US decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty is irrevocable or not, the allies need to agree on a strategy that leaves European security at least no weaker than at present. In December 2017 the Trump administration announced that it was implementing an 'integrated strategy' to respond to Russian actions. This included continued efforts to find a diplomatic resolution; treaty compliant research and development (but not production or flight-testing) of new intermediate-range missiles – for which Congress allocated \$58 million in 2017; and economic sanctions against Russian firms or agencies involved in the development and manufacture of the prohibited missile.

These steps are fine as far as they go, but they ignore the fact that even though the treaty is bilateral, those most affected by its termination will be America's allies. The Europeans should still keep trying to persuade Trump to make a last effort to save the treaty, despite Bolton's preference for ripping it up.

In a low-key way (perhaps too low-key), the US has for the last few years encouraged NATO members to raise INF treaty compliance with Russia, but it is not clear that any allies have made it a high priority. The US needs to find a way to be more open with its allies about the evidence of Russian wrong-doing. Based on a shared picture of what Russia is doing, allies should undertake a concerted lobbying strategy to put political pressure on Moscow; and the EU (whose contribution so far has been a [statement](#) seemingly more critical of the US than Russia) should work with the US on co-ordinated sanctions against Russian entities involved in the 9M729 programme, as the best way of avoiding a new nuclear arms race in Europe.

If Russia is not prepared to comply with the treaty, however, its demise seems inevitable. The US and its allies will need a strategy for countering the new generation of Russian INF. If the US proceeds with withdrawal, Russia will be free to deploy its new cruise missiles near NATO's borders, threatening European countries within their range. It will be years before the US can field directly comparable systems, and in any case they may not be the best answer to the threat.

In the 1980s, NATO's answer to Soviet deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe was the 'dual-track decision' – deployment of similar weapons of its own, coupled with the negotiations that eventually led to the INF Treaty. The deployment of US Pershing and cruise missiles was politically controversial, but most Europeans accepted that the Soviet missiles posed an existential threat to Western Europe that could only be countered by similar nuclear forces on European soil.

Few Western European politicians would have any appetite for a new dual track decision now. It might be a different story in Central Europe, but in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997 the allies stated that they had "no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members", and did not plan even to establish nuclear weapons storage sites there. While there is a strong case for saying that Russia's invasion of Ukraine invalidated the mutual commitments in the founding act, that is not the view of Germany and most other NATO members, and it would require consensus for NATO to terminate the agreement.

Regardless of what happens to the founding act, NATO's nuclear deterrence strategy in Europe needs a fresh look; its '[Deterrence and defence posture review](#)' was agreed in 2012, before Russia's intervention in Ukraine increased tension in Europe to its current level. One US response to Russian INF deployments, which could be implemented without raising political tensions in Europe too high, could be to increase the presence in European waters of US ships and submarines armed with nuclear cruise missiles; as long as Russia believed that the US was ready to risk a nuclear war to defend its allies, additional US naval forces could make an important deterrent contribution. But it would be better for NATO's European allies to have nuclear systems based on European soil over which they have some influence.

The Cold War answer to the problem of ensuring the credibility of the US nuclear guarantee was to have US nuclear weapons delivered by Europeans. Dual-capable aircraft (that is, able to carry nuclear or conventional weapons) operated by Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey and designed to carry US nuclear bombs still have this task. The US is modernising the bombs themselves. Many of the aircraft are reaching the end of their service life, however. All five countries need to commit themselves publicly to replacing them with new dual capable aircraft, whether Eurofighter (as Germany hopes) or F-35 (which the other four are procuring).

To maintain effective deterrence NATO needs to show through regular exercises that it has the political will as well as credible means to deliver nuclear strikes against Russia if required. If stability is ensured through effective deterrence, the US and Russia can negotiate for as long as necessary to reduce levels of nuclear weapons or to abolish particularly destabilising categories of weapons.

US security concerns over China's nuclear forces are justified, but need to be dealt with separately. It is not obvious that the best answer to China's new weapons is to mirror them with similar land-based weapons, not least because that would mean persuading allies such as South Korea and Japan to allow them to be stationed on their territory. In Asia as in Europe, the US may be able to deter China just as well using sea- or air-launched missiles. Despite longstanding US opposition to including China in nuclear arms reduction talks, Washington should start to examine how China (and perhaps other nuclear weapons states, including the UK and France) can be factored into the future strategic balance: the gap between the number of US and Russian nuclear warheads and those of China is not as big as it used to be.

It may be that land-based systems are indeed the best answer to America's security dilemma in Asia. But the Trump administration should weigh the potential benefit of being able to deter China more effectively against the certainty that European security will be reduced if the INF Treaty is terminated. If European security is still a US interest, Trump should restrain his urge to destroy one of the signature achievements of that Republican hero, Ronald Reagan, and look for another solution.

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