



Preserving the INF Treaty

A Special Briefing Paper

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The 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty is under threat, with the United States and Russia exchanging charges of treaty violations. If the treaty unravels, it will open the door to an arms race in ground-launched intermediate-range missiles, which will diminish security in both Europe and Asia. It could also undermine support for other treaties, such as the New START treaty, and make it difficult to reach agreement on new treaties. Washington and Moscow should work to preserve the INF Treaty and its benefits. If the United States and Russia desire to maintain the treaty, there are ways to resolve compliance concerns.

INF Treaty Violation Charges

Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty in December 1987. The treaty bans the possession, testing and deployment of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. The treaty resulted in the destruction of some 2,700 missiles, as well as launchers and support equipment, by mid-1991.

In July 2014, the U.S. government charged that Russia had violated the INF Treaty by developing a prohibited ground-launched cruise missile to intermediate range (press reports indicated that Russia had tested the missile). In March 2017, a senior U.S. military officer said Russia had begun to deploy the missile.

U.S. government sources have recently indicated that the Russian system of concern is an extended range version of the SSC-7 (Iskander K) cruise missile (the Iskander K is a permitted missile with a range of less than 500 kilometers). The extended range version of the Iskander K reportedly uses a launcher that is different from the launcher for an Iskander K. Press reports say that the extended range SSC-7 has been given the SSC-8 identifier. One battalion reportedly is already deployed, and a second fitting out, with deployments expected in all four Russian military districts.

Russia has counter-charged the United States with violating the INF Treaty. The main concern by Russian officials is that the Mk-41 vertical launch system (VLS) for the SM-3 missile interceptors in Romania could also launch intermediate-range cruise missiles; they note that Mk-41 VLS on U.S.

Navy ships can launch sea-launched cruise missiles as well as SM-3 interceptors and other missiles. Moreover, the Russians say the United States uses intermediate-range ballistic missiles as targets in missile defense tests and operates armed, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) that are equivalent to ground-launched cruise missiles of intermediate range.

Views on the Treaty

While it appears that a number of Russian military and civilian officials favor withdrawal from the INF Treaty, Moscow's official position remains that it is committed to the treaty and has not violated it. Russian officials have asserted that they have yet to receive specific information regarding the U.S. charge of a Russia violation; Foreign Minister Lavrov has said that Russia is ready for an "honest but specific dialogue." U.S. officials argue that they have provided the Russians sufficient information so that they could identify the system in question.

Those in Moscow who favor withdrawal from the treaty note that it is a Cold War relic that has been overtaken by technological advances – including the deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Europe – and the spread of intermediate-range missiles to third countries, including China, which deploys hundreds of intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles. Those who favor continued adherence to the treaty express concern about a new arms race and the prospect of the deployment of new U.S. precision-guided weapons systems in Europe.

The Obama administration sought to maintain the INF Treaty and bring Russia back into full compliance, but some voices in Washington suggest that the United States should abandon it. The position of the Trump administration regarding the treaty is under review.

Resolving INF Compliance Concerns

With the political commitment of both sides to maintain the treaty, these charges could be resolved and full compliance with the INF Treaty restored. The United States and Russia could supplement their diplomatic dialogue on INF issues by reconvening the Special Verification Commission (SVC) established by the treaty to address, among other things, compliance concerns. Technical level talks in the SVC could produce solutions that would address the sides' respective compliance concerns. Although the SVC mechanism is limited to the United States, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, U.S. and Russian officials should, given the importance of the INF Treaty for European security, brief officials from allied nations on the status of the SVC discussions.

As regards the U.S. charge, the SVC could agree upon procedures under which the Russian side would exhibit the SSC-8 and its launcher to American experts and explain the missile's characteristics, particularly range. If that satisfied the U.S. side that the missile was consistent with the INF Treaty, the matter would be put to rest. If there were further questions, they could be

discussed in the SVC. Another option would be to create a new panel of technical experts from the U.S. and Russia to discuss these issues.

If the SSC-8 has a range in excess of 500 kilometers (but not in excess of 5,500 kilometers), the issue would be more difficult to resolve. All missiles and their associated launchers would have to be verifiably destroyed in order for Russia to return to compliance with the treaty. The INF Treaty contains elaborate verification procedures, but these were specifically tailored to certify the verifiable destruction of those systems deployed and under development by the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Those procedures might require review and adaptation. In any case, the sooner that detailed discussions on the nature of the alleged violations commence and the sooner a shared understanding on verification requirements to resolve the issues emerges, the easier it will be to find solutions to tackle the compliance problems raised by Russia and the United States.

As for the Russian charges, disagreements over the U.S. use of booster stages in target missiles for ballistic missile defense tests ought to be resolvable. Technical experts could work out language making clear the difference between prohibited intermediate-range ballistic missiles and permitted target missiles for missile defense tests. They might also agree that at any one time each could have no more than some agreed number of target missiles and that those missiles would be restricted to production facilities and sites associated with missile defense tests.

Disagreements on whether armed UAVs (or drones) – which the United States deploys and Russia is developing – are covered by the treaty could be resolved through negotiated clarifications of treaty definitions.

The sides could resolve the allegations regarding the Mk-41 vertical launch system in Romania (and scheduled for deployment in Poland in 2018) in two ways. One would modify the land-based Mk-41 system with an observable difference – ideally, a functionally related observable difference – that would distinguish those launchers from Mk-41 vertical launch systems on U.S. warships. The second approach would look to transparency measures to reassure Russia that the launchers do not contain weapons other than missile interceptors. For example, the United States, with the agreement of Romania, Poland and other NATO allies, could allow Russian inspectors to periodically visit the missile defense sites and randomly choose one or two launch tubes to be opened to confirm that they contain an SM-3 interceptor, not another type of missile.

The United States should inform NATO allies on treaty developments and consult them on any approach to resolve compliance concerns. Since the missile defense site in Romania is officially operated by NATO, opening the site up to Russian experts or officials would presumably require a NATO decision. The same is true for the Aegis Ashore site in Poland, which will be handed over to NATO once it is declared operational. To involve European NATO partners, U.S. and Russian officials might consider including European experts to exhibitions of the SSC-8 or visits to the SM-3 interceptor sites.

The INF Treaty is fundamental to European security. If the treaty collapses, it would further weaken trust between the West and Russia and undermine the entire regime of nuclear arms control between the United States and Russia. This would have unpredictable strategic and political consequences for West-Russia relations. The INF Treaty should be preserved.

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