

Ditching Nuclear Treaties: Trump Withdraws From the INF

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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President Donald J. Trump has made it his signature move to repudiate the signatures of others, and the latest, promised evacuation from the old US-Soviet pact otherwise known as the intermediate range nuclear forces (INF) treaty was merely another artefact to be abandoned.

When it came into force after 1987, it banned ground-launched short- and medium-range missiles within the range of 500 km and 5,500 km. Of primary concern to the US had been the deployment by the Soviets of the SS-20, the result of which was the deployment of Pershing and Cruise missiles in Europe.

[According](#) to the Arms Control Association, the INF Treaty “successfully eliminated an entire class of destabilizing nuclear weapons that were deployed in Europe and helped bring an end to the spiralling Cold War arms race.” Some 2,700 missiles and their requisite launchers were destroyed in the arrangement. It suggested a certain degree of trust: both Washington and Moscow were permitted verification about installations.

The usual withdrawal technique (the Trump retraction style) has become known. Trump is an expert practitioner of interruptus, but the issue is what he replaces it with: a new vision with provisions and obligations, or butchered nonsense wrapped in ribbon? “I don’t know why President Obama didn’t negotiate or pull out.” The Russians had “been violating it for many years.” This [included](#) the testing, and ultimate deployment of the 9M729, a ground-launched cruise missile that purportedly edged well and beyond the confines of the treaty. The initial response to such alleged violations was one of pressure, convincing Moscow to come back to the fold via an “integrated strategy”. That, evidently, proved too measured an approach.

Yet even now, the Russians, typified by the reaction of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, are both bemused and irritated. The veteran official [preferred](#) to avoid divining coffee grounds on where the White House might move next, while Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov suggested that no formal measures to exit the treaty have yet been undertaken. Ruslan Pukhov of the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies was even [optimistic](#):

“If there’s good will on both sides, including ours, then probably the treaty can be saved.”

It was Russian President Vladimir Putin who had anticipated this circus of retraction, suggesting in 2007 with a degree of appropriate cheek that the treaty did not advance Russia’s interests. That huffing response had come as a direct response to Washington’s withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, yet another Cold War artefact

confined to the mausoleum of agreements long dead.

The nuclear intermediate treaty was meant to eliminate merely one category of madness, another blubber of criminal insanity that typifies the creatures of the megadeath complex. (In any future war crimes court, they will always claim that weapons of mass murder were needed to prevent mass murder, even if they did ensure the logical consequences of such killing.)

The INF Treaty always troubled such national security hawks of the ilk of John Bolton, who felt as far back as 2011 that Washington should leave the treaty for no better reason than combating an impetuous China. That was hardly surprising for a man who [subscribes](#) to the view of Charles de Gaulle that,

“Treaties, you see, are like girls and roses: They last while they last.” The INF had “outlived its usefulness in its current form – so it should either be changed or thrown out.”

Trump’s arguments are those of his counterparts. Both Russia and the United States have been cheating, baulking, adjusting, reading between clauses and playing before their meanings. Violations have been treated as instances of mild infidelity, and even the European states have shown little by way of concern. They are the faithless partners in a marriage of inconvenience, but in so far as it lasted, it afforded a cover for the couple to behave at international forums with a degree of questionable decorum. In Trump’s era, decorum is an unnecessary encumbrance fit to be scorned. The animal must be set free, the hand must grab, and everything else is left to chance.

Such moves might well be cheered in the Kremlin. Washington, as Steven Fifer, former State Department official and arms control expert based at the Brookings Institute [predicts](#), “will get the blame for killing the treaty.” The debate, if you could venture to use that term, was bound to “devolve into an exchange of charges, counter-charges and denials.”

In concrete terms, Trump has changed props, but risks unnecessary costs in attempting to develop weapons that would have fallen within the INF’s remit. For one, it will ruffle Russia’s security concerns regarding central and eastern European states. “Tomahawks with nuclear warheads could be loaded with anti-missile sites in Romania and Poland as soon as US leaves INF Treaty,” [tweeted](#) *National Defense* editor Igor Korotchenko. The enthusiasm by such governments for US hardware in combating the wily Russian bear makes that prospect a distinct possibility.

Then comes the more practical side of things, making such a decision unnecessarily boisterous. The US is more than [capable](#) in deploying various systems (both air and sea launched) that could threaten Russian targets, should Washington ever take leave of its senses.

The withdrawal also risks the direction of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), an agreement near and dear to weapons control experts. Yet for all this jazzing of the show, Russia’s Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev had his antennae up: the Kremlin was still [keen](#) to work with Washington to eliminate “mutual” grievances concerning the INF. The dance on these gruesome weapons continues to enchant even the most irritated, and irritating, of rivals.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Kampmark](#)

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