

Cheering a New Arms Race: The End of the INF

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US President Donald Trump is a master of the withdrawal method. That said, it is often forgotten that the United States remains that most fickle of creatures, joining, or abandoning international regimes that might be seen to jar with the national interest. Initial preparations for such global arrangements tend to be initially optimistic, even rosy. Eager to draft a suitable document, say, the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court, diligent diplomats give the work a made-in-America feel. They are then told ratification will be impossible in the Senate. Uncle Sam duly becomes a unilateralist jingo.

The difference from what has come before is that Trump is not troubled by any sense of enduring history. There are no restraints, nor caveats. Pre-Trump history had to be bad, if not altogether rotten. This sort of attitude comes with doses of good and heavy draughts of bad. Tariff wars result; states like Iran can be provoked. Allies can be mocked.

On October 20, 2018, the US president announced that his country would be withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Since then, the INF has been confined to an aged home, given modest palliative care, and not so respectfully expired.

The agreement came about because of a tiff in the nuclear family on certain weapons, notably ground-launched intermediate missiles. The Soviet Union had moved SS-20 missiles into Europe in 1979. The US balanced it with Pershing and cruise missiles in West Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom. The prospect of turning Europe into a wasteland in futility presented itself with a certain glaringness. Protests were held; politicians toyed with a fragile destiny. The Kremlin and Washington stared at each other.

The result was the INF Treaty, [described](#) by President Ronald Reagan and the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev as follows:

"This treaty is historic for its objective – the complete elimination of an entire class of US and Soviet nuclear arms – and for the innovative character and scope of its verification provisions."

It mandated that both sides destroy and not deploy ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometres, be they conventional or nuclear.

It took some time, but disgruntlement about observing the injunctions of the treaty were to come. China, for instance, was not a member, leaving it to feed growing aspirations in deploying intermediate-range forces in East Asia. And the military industrial complex is a cheeky old thing, bound to do its Promethean mischief in due course. In 2014, the US took issue with Russia's testing of the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile. Three years later, it was alleged that the weapon system had been deployed. By October 2018, Russia was

deemed to be in full-blown violation of the treaty and given till February 2019 to right the ledger. Not that the US never had its fair share of contingency designs in the system.

Now, Russia has also conceded to putting the 1987 document to bed. Doing so provides greater latitude of missile deployment without the sense of being under a legal cloud, though few implications will be initially visible.

“In the short term, there’s no immediate physical change after Friday,” [observes](#) former US diplomat versed on non-proliferation issues. “The United States and Russia are not going to begin on Saturday deploying hundreds of new missiles.”

Richard A. Clarke [hazarded](#) a guess on the implications. Smug yet troubled, he reminded us that he had been a bricklayer in the original agreement, sad to see it lapse into history.

“As someone who helped designed the INF Treaty, only Russia benefits from the US withdrawal. No European country will let us deploy new nukes and we don’t have any even under development.”

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has [argued](#) that,

“This will likely heighten, not reduce, the threat posed by ballistic missiles.”

At the heart of every arms control understanding is a studied hypocrisy. By way of example, every power which has nuclear weapons wants to keep them. Many powers without it want them but will be denied access to such technology by the family of hardnosed enforcers. But within the nuclear cabal lies a range of inconsistent and, in some cases, contradictory factors. Arms control might be seen as another form of controlled addiction, never case of abolition and true security.

Ending the INF is bound to cause some glumness, but the critics about its binary nature were growing in number, eager to see its revision or scuttling. In 2014, Trump’s current national security advisor John Bolton was already [making mutterings](#) about a treaty obsolete before its violation. It is easy to forget that the Reagan administration initially began with bellicosity, fearing that any sense of restraining the nuclear arms race was only coming at the expense of US hegemony. Such arms control was not for them. Yet it was Reagan, spurred on astrological guidance or otherwise, who finally found reassurance in the signing of the INF with his sparring counterpart.

There is bound to be an initial boost in expenditure and testing on weapons that would have otherwise been banned by the INF. A mini-arms race is in the offing: to each his degree of deserving lunacy. There will also be, if the views of NATO Secretary General Jason Stoltenberg are anything to go by, an increased emphasis on improving missile defences. Once that dash is done, the parties may well find themselves at the negotiating table again, with a new cohort of arms inspectors ready for employment. Till then, Trump is likely to set his wrecking ball to another arms control agreement. Beware, negotiators of New START.

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