

Will the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) Be Kept Beyond Its 30th Anniversary?

Part II: US grievances against Russia

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The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) constitutes an agreement between the US and the Soviet Union pertaining to the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter- Range Missiles.

By the summer of 1991, the Soviet Union and US had completely eliminated all the land-based ballistic and cruise missiles and their launchers that were subject to the **1987 INF Treaty**, as verified by extensive on-site inspections.

This was confirmed by both official Russian sources as well as a series of State Department [reports](#), Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments. Not one of those State Department reports contains any documented, fact-based examples of how the Russians have ever shirked their commitments under the provisions of the INF Treaty.

Feeble allusions to some kind of Russian “violations” of the 1987 treaty began to spread back in 2012, after two high-ranking representatives of the Obama administration met with the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, chaired by **John Kerry**. In June 2012, Republican **Senator Michael Turner** wrote a letter to the US National Security Council and to the heads of the American intelligence community, asking why Moscow’s tests of its strategic intercontinental ballistic missiles shouldn’t be considered a violation of the 1987 treaty.

In the response offered by US Under Secretary of Defense **James Miller** on Aug. 3 of that year, the latter stated that the Russian 2012 ICBM tests “do not fall under any of the provisions or restrictions set forth in the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles.” This was quite a reasonable answer, because in accordance with the Soviet-American and Russian-American treaties on the limitation and reduction of strategic offensive nuclear weapons, the term “intercontinental ballistic missiles” applies to missiles with a minimum range of 5,500 km, and thus the Russian ICBMs would not meet the definition of intermediate- and shorter-range missiles as found in the INF Treaty.

In December 2013, at the instigation of a number of senators, several US news sites [once again](#) began clamoring about Russian “violations” of the 1987 treaty. In 2013, a group of ten Republican senators, who had previously tried to pressure **President Barack Obama** over Russian “violations” of provisions of the INF Treaty, drafted an amendment to the FY 2014 defense appropriations bill. This amendment would require the 44th president’s administration to submit a report to Congress that would include any intelligence data

available to NATO member states pertaining to Russian compliance with the INF Treaty.

The Russian ICBM [RS-26](#), also known as Rubezh, was singled out for unfair criticism as well. It was patently obvious that the US lawmakers were complaining about this promising missile system because of its improved ability to pierce the American “missile shield.”

In an attempt to use political accusations to get rid of the RS-26 ICBMs, which has included claims that it actually has a shorter flight range, equal to that of an intermediate-range missile, US lawmakers have tried to trot out provisions of the INF Treaty as a legal basis for their efforts to get it banned, although the treaty has nothing whatsoever to do with the this ICBM, either directly or indirectly, since this missile is intercontinental.

Therefore, it couldn't have been simpler for the Russians to fend off this attack: they released a statement that the missiles cited by the Americans were not subject to this agreement at all because it only applies to ballistic and cruise missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 km. With no hope of progress on their attempts to mix this ICBM into the INF Treaty, Washington pulled it from the agenda.

But in 2014, newly strident voices were heard in Washington alleging Russian “violations” of the 1987 treaty.

There were then charges that Russia's operational R-500 cruise missile (NATO classification [SSC-7](#)) was in violation of the 1987 treaty. But that weapon was also completely exempt from the restrictions in the treaty's provisions, as it has a flight range below the 500-kilometer cutoff.

In 2014, the well-known Dutch authority on nuclear weapons, Hans Kristensen, who is a director at the Federation of American Scientists, read through the relevant computations in the US State Department's report on compliance with arms-control treaties, and he came up with [two very reasonable questions](#): why did the Americans not name the type of missile that Russia had allegedly tested and why did it not cite the time of the test? Later, the American arms-control analyst Kingston Reif [pointed to](#) these two gray areas as well, and added that the report also lacked information about the number of tests and the location where they were carried out.

At the special consultations on this issue held at the Russian Foreign Ministry in September 2015 between the heads of the arms-control divisions of the Russian foreign ministry and US State Dept., the American delegation was never able to provide their Russian counterparts with any documented evidence of Russian “violations” of that treaty.

In June 2015, a [partially declassified report](#) written by the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, **General Martin Dempsey**, claimed that Washington was considering deploying cruise missiles with nuclear warheads to Europe to offset Russian “violations” of the INF Treaty, although the goals set by that agreement had long been met.



The State Department's Rose Gottemoeller, left, and the Defense Department's Brian McKeon testify on December 1, 2015, at a hearing in the House of Representatives on Russia's alleged violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

When the Trump administration took over at the White House in 2017 it once again began reiterating those unfounded accusations of Russian “non-compliance” with the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles.

By February of this year, the New York Times was citing sources in the US administration in its [claims](#) that the Russian military had allegedly deployed a fully operational division of ground-launched surface-to-surface cruise missiles, which, according to the US, violates the 1987 treaty.

A similar [statement](#) was made in March 2017 by **General Paul Selva**, Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaking at a House Armed Services Committee hearing in Washington in March 2017. He estimated that the system that has been developed puts most of the alliance’s sites in Europe at risk and that the Russians have deliberately deployed it in order to pose a threat to NATO and to facilities within the NATO area of responsibility. He added that he had raised this issue during discussions with the Russians, but he did not provide details of the accusations he had made.

The authors of the [State Department’s April 2017 report](#) on compliance with arms-control treaties pointed out that the US has been expressing concern about Russia’s conduct in regard to this issue, and during that time it has provided more than enough information to the Russians to enable them to identify the missile in question .

In the document mentioned above, the US State Department makes reference to Articles I, IV, VI, and VII of the INF Treaty, which prohibit the parties from any future possession of intermediate- or shorter-range ballistic or cruise missiles, launchers for such missiles, or any support equipment or structures associated with such missiles or launchers, and ban the production of any stages of such missiles. But simply citing these articles does not mean that the other party has violated some provisions of the 1987 treaty.

It has been reported that the Pentagon has come up with its own in-house designation for a “new Russian” mobile, ground-based cruise missile, calling it the SSC-8 (from an [interview](#) that the Russian newspaper Kommersant conducted with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov). But the simple fact that a foreign missile system has been assigned a certain classification doesn’t really tell us anything.

The State Dept. report included a very significant admission, disavowing two previous accusations by the Americans regarding alleged Russian “violations” of the INF Treaty, one of which concerned the operational R-500 missile and the other – the RS-26 ICBM (the State Department has withdrawn its complaints). **This admission means that previously, when Washington was accusing Moscow of “violating” the treaty based on Russia’s deployment of these two types of missiles that were not actually subject to the treaty’s restrictions, the US was merely bluffing and attempting to block their deployment by simply circulating baseless accusations.**

Like previous reports of this type, the US State Dept. briefing on the INF Treaty, which was released in April 2017, offers no compelling evidence of any Russian “violations.”

The American Congress has more than once [urged](#) the US to not only withdraw from the 1987 treaty, but also to arm American NATO allies that are not INF signatories with new

ground-launched cruise missiles, in order to “retaliate” against Russia. There have also been calls to introduce specific new sanctions against Russia, due to Moscow’s alleged non-compliance with the terms of that treaty.

Another justification that has been offered for a US pullout from the INF Treaty is that China, which is not bound by that agreement, will supposedly be able to develop an arsenal of nuclear missiles that will eclipse that of the US.

The [2018 National Defense Authorization Act](#), which was introduced in Congress in June 2017, would authorize the development of a new, conventional, road-mobile, ground-launched cruise missile system with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers, i.e., precisely falling under the restrictions set by the 1987 treaty.

The bill that has been submitted accuses Russia of “violations” of the INF Treaty and allows the US to fully or partially suspend that agreement’s authority and to deploy additional missile-defense assets in Europe, in addition to the ground- and sea-based weaponry already stationed there. It would allow the Pentagon to refuse to comply with Article VI of the treaty, if it can be proven that Russia has violated that agreement. This article prohibits either party from producing or flight-testing intermediate-range or shorter-range missiles, or producing any stages or launchers of such missiles.

The bill directs a number of the country’s relevant departments and agencies to analyze the extent to which the Russian RS-26 ICBM is or is not in violation of the INF Treaty. If it turns out that this ICBM is not subject to the new START Treaty that is currently binding on Russia and the US, then this will mean that the RS-26 will be deemed to be in violation of the treaty.

The bill authorizes the allocation of \$50 million to develop a new missile system “in response to noncompliance of the Russian Federation with its obligations under the INF Treaty,” of which \$25 million will be invested in the research, development, and production of new American missiles “with a maximum range of 5,500 kilometers.”

Both the House and Senate versions of the bill, which were overwhelmingly approved in both chambers, have been submitted to a conference committee for reconciliation, after which the consensus version of the bill will be sent to Donald Trump to request his signature, which – if given – will make the bill a valid law. The consensus version of the bill has already established a budget for these goals of \$58 million. The background materials offered by Congress state that in light of the Russian Federation’s “violation” of the INF Treaty, the United States is legally justified in suspending its implementation entirely or in refusing to abide by a number of its articles.

The Washington Post [acknowledges](#) that the law calls for “[t]he establishment of a new medium-range ground missile program.” That article also argues that the development of such a program “ ... would open the door to the United States withdrawing from the treaty and building new medium-range missiles of its own.”



Some American analysts have begun to question the wisdom of a US withdrawal from this treaty, but their voices are still being drowned out by the declamations of those who favor resolving the problem of the treaty in this manner.

For example, a July 29, 2017 [editorial](#) in the New York Times pointed out that the creation of a new US intermediate-range missile capable of flying up to 5,500 km, in addition to the withdrawal of Washington from the 1987 treaty, would “give leaders [of the two countries] little time to react.” The newspaper also criticized the readiness of the country’s military and political leaders to spend more than one trillion dollars to modernize the nation’s nuclear arsenal. The NYT believes that the US decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty would destroy the very framework of arms control, eliminate support for other, similar treaties, and cast further doubt on Washington’s commitment to its responsibilities – and those pledges have already begun to look shaky now that Donald Trump has pulled out of the Paris Climate Protocol. The newspaper’s editorial board quite rightly noted that the 1987 treaty includes a mechanism for resolving disputes between its signatories, and the US, backed by its allies, should pursue a solution in that forum, by which the board is clearly referring to the two countries’ Special Verification Commission.

The newspaper warned that the new [Nuclear Posture Review](#) being drafted by the Trump administration – a document that traditionally spells out the place and role of nuclear weapons in US defense and foreign policy – could stymie the plans of former President Barack Obama to try to reduce the numbers of nuclear weapons and to somewhat reduce their role in the country’s security strategy.

Speaking out against Washington’s renunciation of the INF Treaty, Thomas Graham, an American diplomat and member of the National Advisory Board at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, [noted](#) that by threatening to completely dismantle the INF Treaty, Congress risks making matters worse by opening the door to Russian deployment of intermediate- and shorter-range ballistic missiles in Europe. In his view, a US withdrawal from that treaty would remove all limits on Moscow’s intermediate- and shorter-range nuclear forces – limits that have strengthened the security of the United States and its allies for three decades.

Another American arms-control specialist, **James Acton**, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has [noted](#) that although the 1987 treaty was signed 30 years ago in a quite different geopolitical context, it still serves the security interests of the United States and its allies. And yet this analyst has suggested that American heavy bombers with air-launched cruise missiles be stationed in Europe, just in case the INF Treaty is terminated for some reason.

It is possible that the issue of Russian “violations” of the INF Treaty will be mentioned in the updated Nuclear Posture Review, which is being drafted in accordance with instructions received from Donald Trump last April.

Given this picture, the threat of a US withdrawal from the 1987 INF Treaty is looming as an increasingly real possibility.

Of course that would require a commensurate response from the Russian side, should this threat materialize during Donald Trump’s time in office. He would definitely go down in history as the leader whose abandonment of a treaty sparked a new round in the nuclear arms race, violating the nuclear nonproliferation regime, compromising the world’s strategic stability, and escalating the degree of mistrust between many states.

[To be continued...](#)

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