

The 1987 Treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Has Not Yet Perished



Gorbachev and Regan signing the INF Treaty

Photo Credit: Wikipedia

Written by:

Chris Jones, Associate Professor, Jackson School of International Studies, UW

November 4, 2018

The principal spokesman of the Trump Administration, National Security Advisor John Bolton, went to Moscow in late October 2018 to inform President Putin that the United States will soon withdraw from the 1987 Treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF). When Trump and Putin meet in Paris on November 11 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, there is an off chance that they might announce a re-negotiation the INF Treaty. But the complexities of such bi-lateral discussions have multi-lateral complications involving Europe, the Korean Peninsula, the Middle East, China plus non-nuclear US allies dependent on US security guarantees.

Bolton told Putin that the United States is now facing “INF” deployments from both Russia and China. Such INF forcers cannot target the US homeland, but they could target US allies and US military bases in various “theaters” of Eurasia.

Since 1987 the INF agreement has prevented the deployments of ground-based Soviet and American missiles with ranges from 500 to 5500 kilometers on Eurasian territories stretching from Atlantic Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Bolton’s principal claims are that the Russian Federation has violated the INF agreement by developing a ground-based version of a new cruise missile system (code named “9M729”) that can also be adapted for launch from aircraft or naval vessels. The INF Treaty does not limit comparable US missiles – or prohibit the deployment of comparable Russian missile systems. The Russian Federation has made a highly-technical case that US missile defense systems based near Russian borders violate the fine details of the INF Treaty. Moscow may have a credible argument- or may be trying to link Russian ground-based missile deployments to US missile defense systems to defend US allies in Eurasia – and thus reduce the utility of Russian nuclear weapons.

The INF Treaty prohibits Russian and American INF weapons in designated geographic zones located within what are now many different countries, including Germany and other NATO allies of the US. In addition, the revised INF treaty of 1992 made each of the successor states of the USSR a party to the Treaty banning INF on their territories.

Russia faces the deployments of ground-based missiles in China, India, Pakistan and North Korea that have the ranges necessary to target sites in Russia. The vast majority of the nuclear missiles fielded by China, India, Pakistan and North Korea have ranges over 500 kilometers but less than 5500 kilometers. But Russia has no corresponding missiles with similar “INF” ranges. For Russia, the hypothetical question has become whether non-American “INF” missiles create a perception of Russia as a Eurasian nuclear superpower simultaneously limited by the INF Treaty and the New START Treaty of 2010. New START, scheduled to expired in 2021, limits Russia and the US to 1550 warheads on 800 launchers with intercontinental range (almost of them missiles and the small remainder consisting of long-range bombers). In comparison the INF Treaty eliminated a grand total of 2,692 nuclear-armed U.S. and Russian missiles, about 1900 of which were Soviet missiles. For the US, the INF question will be that of the credibility of US security guarantees to non-nuclear allies in Europe and Asia that could be in range of newly-deployed Russian INF – plus the other “Eurasian” missiles that fit in the INF category.

China is not a signatory of the INF treaty. It has supported the creation of three nuclear weapons free zones that directly border on China (Central Asia, Mongolia and Southeast Asia). Like the UK, France, Japan and South Korea and other Eurasian states that are not signatories of the INF Treaty, China has been a major beneficiary of the Treaty’s ban on the category of superpower missiles that support theater war doctrines in Moscow and Washington for “fighting and winning” nuclear conflicts with missiles of limited range which are based in what the US and

Russia can globally view as mere geographic “theaters” of Eurasia. The restoration of American and Russian INF, plus those of other Eurasian nuclear states, would put all of America’s treaty Eurasian allies within reach of Russian INF plus the INF of other Eurasian states. For China and other states located inside such “theaters”, there is nothing limited about nuclear war waged with Russian, American or other “Eurasian” INF.

President Trump has put on the table an incongruous collection of policies that may have the effect of linking nuclear security issues across northern Eurasia. He has met many of the conditions stipulated by Kim Jong Un for a resolution of the political and military conflicts involving the DPRK, South Korea and the United States. The main thrust of Trump’s North Korean policy has been to accept the permanence and legitimacy of the North Korean regime and thus to remove the political logic for deployed DPRK nuclear weapons as guarantees against US economic and diplomatic policies aimed at regime collapse. In the spring of 2018 Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Program of Action (JCOA), the 2015 non-proliferation agreement signed by Iran with the US, Russia, China, the UK, France, Germany and the European Union. In the case of Iran, Trump has alternated between proposing a revised “Iran deal” covering missiles as well as fissile materials and then threatening additional economic sanctions intended to force the collapse of the Islamic Republic. Trump had previously conducted a similar *pas de deux* of mutual threats with Kim Jong Il during the first months of the Trump administration, In early 2018 the Trump Administration issued the US Nuclear Posture Review. This soberly-written document contemplates the development and use of low-yield nuclear weapons on cruise missiles launched from air and naval platforms to deal with “conventional” threats. Such unregulated nuclear forces promise the revival of the Cold War nightmares of American allies in zones hosting American nuclear weapons. One nightmare is that

of entrapment in a “limited” nuclear conflict of utterly catastrophic impact on a small US ally—such as a NATO member in the Baltic zone. US allies also have nightmares of “abandonment” by an American president who is unwilling to risk a Russian nuclear attack on Boston or Brussels in response to a “limited” nuclear conflict – such as one waged around Russia’s Baltic port of Kaliningrad. For US allies, the principal achievement of the INF treaty was to remove the nuclear weapons most likely to inspire alternating nightmares of entrapment and abandonment.

Could there be the diplomatic options after an American withdrawal from the INF Treaty? A new “Trump Treaty” involving China and perhaps other states? The complexity of such negotiations would be staggering. Such negotiations would probably fuse with the unresolved nuclear issues of the Korean Peninsula and the withdrawal of the United States from the “Iran deal” of 2015. In dealing with both Iran and North Korea, National Security Advisor John Bolton would bring considerable baggage to arms control negotiations.

Bolton has described the JPCOA as “the worst diplomatic debacle” in America history. In late September of 2018 Bolton warned the Iranian leaders, “If you cross us, our allies, or our partners; if you harm our citizens; if you continue to lie, cheat, and deceive, yes, there will indeed be hell to pay.” In August 2003, North Korean state media denounced Bolton as “human scum and a bloodsucker” . The DPRK Foreign Ministry refused to deal with him. Nonetheless, the Bush administration ultimately did participate in the inconclusive Six Party Talks (DPRK, ROK, US, PRC, Japan and Russia). Despite his denunciation of the arms control agreements signed by previous US Administrations, Bolton was the primary architect of the Bush Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Bolton served as Bush’s Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security and later as US Ambassador to the UN. The PSI was a multi-lateral—but

informal—program for detecting and halting nuclear proliferation. The PSI, now with 105 members, including Russia but not China, has an organizational structure put in place by the Obama Administration to coordinate the ad-hoc efforts preferred by Bolton. The point here is that Bolton, the mercurial author of an autobiography entitled *Surrender is Not An Option*, actually has a history of supporting (gasp!) multi-lateral arms control agreements he deems beneficial to the United States.

Perhaps the most likely outcome of a US withdrawal from the INF Treaty is that of multiple Eurasian versions of the Korean Theater nuclear reality show currently starring Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un. Eurasian variations on what promises to be a long-running Korean drama could generate chain-reaction war-fighting doctrines and theater nuclear weapons deployments from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Such developments could vastly complicate the security dilemmas facing Russia. And perhaps precipitate ruptures in the American alliances at both ends of Eurasia by skittish publics not amused by the tweets and tantrums of an American president who revels in upending rules-based arms control systems put in place by his predecessors. Or perhaps there could be an arms control version of Trump's NAFTA negotiations: after much *sturm und drang*, a new treaty with relatively minor changes but a new name marketed under the Trump brand.

At the height of the INF crisis of the early 1980s two American nuclear weapons experts once described theater nuclear war-fighting strategies as NUTS - strategies based on Nuclear Utilization Target Selection.¹ Such strategies for “limited” nuclear war rejected the arms control logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Arms control treaties based on MAD required corresponding arms reductions, transparent security policies, and reliable verification procedures. This was the achievement of the INF Treaty and the subsequent treaties after 1987—a mutual acceptance of MAD by the leading nuclear powers of Eurasia. Before the INF Treaty, the Holy

Grail for the Soviet authors of Warsaw Pact declaratory doctrine had been a European theater posture that was completely NUTS. The Soviets accused the Reagan Administration of adopting an American INF strategy that was equally NUTS. The restoration of Russian and American INF would almost certainly resuscitate the doctrines of “fighting and winning a nuclear war”—strategic formulas buried by Reagan and Gorbachev. Some key spokesmen for the Putin regime have emphatically rejected a return to the declaratory Soviet doctrine of the pre-1987 era that envisioned military victory on foreign territory. They have also voiced support both for the INF Treaty and the renewal of the New START Treaty. Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has publicly called for a mutual Russian- American statement renouncing concepts of fighting and winning a nuclear war. Might Putin persuade Trump and Bolton to consider such a joint statement? The critical issue would be limits on the ranges of missiles deployed on the Eurasian supercontinent for “theater wars.” That is how the INF Treaty of 1987 led to the end of the Cold War nuclear arms race.

¹ Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr, and Wolfgang K. H. Panofsky, "Nuclear Weapons in the 1980s: MAD vs NUTS: The Mutual Hostage Relationship of the Superpowers, *Foreign Affairs*, Winter, 1981 No.2



Chris Jones is an Associate Professor of International Studies at the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. His teaching focuses on NATO/Warsaw pact relations, post-Cold War security issues, and political economy of the post-Cold War era. He teaches selected courses in International Security, International Law and Arms Control, International Security Policies of Democracies, and Security Dilemmas of the Russian Federation.

For more information, visit the [faculty page](#).