

A Carrot-and-Stick Approach to Resolve the INF Treaty Crisis

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Few in Washington express much doubt that Russia recently violated the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (1), testing and deploying ground-launched cruise missiles within the treaty's prohibited range.

Yet the lack of clear public evidence of Russian violations amid persistent Russian denials has left the United States in a position where the strongest American retaliatory responses could provide Russia with an excuse to abandon the treaty.

Russia already views the INF as an inconvenient hindrance given that its restrictions do not apply to countries such as China and Pakistan that could threaten Russia (but not the United States) with the INF-class missiles. Most U.S. analysts see the treaty as serving U.S. interests given that it limits the threat to US allies in Europe and East Asia. Yet failing to respond to the Russian alleged violation could be considered as foolishly ignoring a breach of an important US-Russian arms control treaty, which could, in turn, embolden Russia to conduct further violations.

As a result, U.S. responses have tended to fall along predictable lines. Hardliners in Congress have introduced the "INF Treaty Preservation Act" which provides funds for the US to develop and potentially deploy a new ground-based cruise missile that would violate the treaty's

constraints. They claim that the legislation is a means to confront Russia with an “unacceptable alternative” to continued testing and deployment of systems that violate the pact. The additional leverage of such a potential deployment, they believe, should force Russia to end its violations. The House approved a somewhat stronger version of the measure in its annual defense policy bill, authorizing spending immediately \$25 million to initiate a program to develop an INF-prohibited missile. The Senate would hold off this spending until the Pentagon provided a report (due within four months) on the feasibility of modifying existing or planned cruise missiles so they could reach the ranges prohibited under the treaty. Differences between the two bills will be reconciled in a final bill currently being drafted by House and Senate negotiators.

Both versions would require the President to report within 15 months on whether Russia had flight tested, produced or possessed INF-banned missiles within that period and if so, would declare that the United States was no longer constrained by the pact.

The Trump Administration has registered its opposition to the congressional initiative, seeing it as interfering with the president’s ability to control arms control diplomacy and potential military responses. In a statement of administration policy, it stated:

“This provision unhelpfully ties the Administration to a specific type of missile system and funding requirements, which would limit potential military response options. The Administration would support broad authorization of research and development on missile systems, including those prohibited by the treaty, to determine candidate systems that could become programs of record.” (2)

The legislation implicitly echoes a successful strategy that led to the treaty’s enactment in the 1980s. At that time NATO responded to the Soviet Union’s deployment of the 5,000 kilometer range SS-20 missile with the deployment of US Pershing II weapons to Western Europe. Yet the analogy is far from exact. At that time, the deployment of SS-20s was not denied by Russia. Moreover, despite Allied government support, deployment of the Pershing II, during a tense period of the Cold War, faced massive public protests. There is little to indicate that there would be significant allied support for such a deployment today. A more likely outcome is that initiating the development of such a system would simply provide Russia with a ready excuse for leaving the treaty without any guarantee that its implied deployment threat could be carried out.

Supporters of the legislation argue that the treaty does not ban research and development of such systems, only testing and deployment. Still, many of the supporters of this legislation inside and outside of Congress have long advocated for greater deployments of U.S nuclear weapon systems to allies to guard against what they see as Russia’s greater willingness to use nuclear weapons on its own terms were it to be losing a conventional confrontation. The legislation could provide them with a means to achieve this longstanding ambition.

Several former U.S. arms control officials wrote in a letter to US Senators in September 2017 that the legislation would shift blame from Russia, and Russia “could respond by publicly repudiating the treaty and deploying large numbers of noncompliant missiles without any constraints.” (3) They put their faith in bilateral dialogue and existing military responses to try to deal with Russia’s actions and intentions, an approach began by the Obama administration. They noted that “Russia’s violation of the INF Treaty is a serious matter. But a tit-for-tat response—developing our own new nuclear-armed missile—won’t make us safer and will only make the problem worse”. (4) It would also allow Russia to leave the treaty while blaming the United States for the treaty’s demise.

To date Russia has insistently denied the accusations, claiming that the United States has not produced sufficient evidence. At the same time, Russian officials have countered with technical quibbles of their own, particularly that US land-based missile defense installations in Europe could be used to launch conventional cruise missiles.

What should be done? Given the unsatisfactory nature of above-mentioned U.S policy alternatives, another approach is needed, effectively putting the onus on Russia to clarify whether or not it intends to exit the pact. This would involve a carrot-and-stick approach, one that could be supported in legislation by Congress.

The carrot would involve an offer to continue working through the treaty's Special Verification Commission. The United States could propose a time-limited discussion to agree on "distinguishable characteristics of missiles and launchers" (5) that could cover the Russian and US concerns over the Aegis and SSC-8. Follow-on inspections of both systems could be considered as a way of implementing the agreement.

Simultaneously, rather than moving toward breaching the pact immediately with ground-based cruise missiles, the United States could deploy and/or develop additional NATO assets that do not violate the INF but could respond in some fashion to Russian deployments. The introduction of these "sticks" can be staged in a way to assure a prompt and satisfactory end to the dispute. These military options could include additional deployments of US and Western European ground troops to Central and Eastern Europe to assuage any fears of decoupling on the part of NATO allies; greater deployments of conventional precision cruise missiles; revival of sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles; and moving forward with plans for a new generation of air-launched nuclear cruise missiles.

For 30 years, the INF treaty has proved to be a cornerstone of European security. Russia's action has loosened that cornerstone. The United States must act to reinforce the Treaty, or risk a collapse of the wider security architecture.

(1) A bilateral treaty between the United States and Russia forswearing the testing and deployment of ground based ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500-5500 kilometers, signed in 1987.

(2) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=127977>

(3) <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/america-about-dump-the-inf-treaty-22355>

(4) <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/america-about-dump-the-inf-treaty-22355>

(5) http://russianforces.org/blog/2017/07/is_it_too_late_to_have_an_info.shtml

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