

# END OF AN ERA: IMPLICATIONS OF THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM THE INF

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In late 2018, the United States indicated that it would withdraw from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Completed in 1987, the INF was a bilateral agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States, resulting in a combined total of 2,692 missiles being destroyed. In 2011, however, the United States accused Russia of developing, testing, and deploying a missile with a range of 2500 km, beyond the range set out in the INF. Russia rejected these accusations and the two countries have since quarreled in a “dialogue of the deaf” that has created an impasse. Souring US-Russia relations also thrust the INF – a cornerstone of stability for arms control – into the domestic policy spotlight in both countries. The United States’ stated intention to withdraw illustrates the current precarious state of US-Russia relations as well as the fact that arms control is not immune to political headwinds.

The future of the INF appears bleak. Ad hoc initiatives or memoranda of understanding addressing new technologies like strike drones may present an avenue for cooperation moving forward, but the likelihood of the United States and Russia entering into a similar deal is highly unlikely if the agreement does not include China. Times have changed since the United States and Russia represented the only regional powers in Asia, and as President Trump has made clear, the only way the United States would remain is if

Russia stopped violations and China joined the treaty. China, however, has little incentive when 95 percent of its arsenal is comprised of short- and mid-range missiles.

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The end of the INF has implications for India. India viewed the INF in a negative light because it made the American military presence in the Pacific vulnerable to Chinese missiles, which in turn undermined the United States’ security commitments to its Asian allies, including India. India, however, also has a defense partnership with Russia, and if conflict between the United States and Russia continues to increase, that defense partnership with Moscow could come under pressure from the United States. Although India would not be inclined to participate in an Asia-wide or universal INF treaty because it would affect India’s nuclear deterrence, it would be open to increased cooperation with the United States, Europe, Japan, and maybe Israel on high-tech initiatives like missile defense. The increasing threat of China’s offensive missile capabilities combined with the destabilizing actions of North Korea suggests missile defense will see a boom in the region. An increased emphasis on missile defense could also have the positive outcome of downplaying the role of nuclear weapons in the region. If there is a successful effort to discount the concept of nuclear deterrence and challenge the idea that a nuclear war can be fought to win a meaningful military victory, a global no first use of nuclear weapons treaty like the one India is debating domestically could gain traction.

In the broader context of arms control, the end of the INF represents the end of an era. Arms control measures in the region are weakened and

the danger posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are increased. Although states recognize this as a pressing problem, there seems to be an agreement among many states including the United States, Russia, and India that the INF was outdated because it did not account for China's increased military threat (despite Chinese claims that it is not a threat and its intentions are peaceful). The upcoming Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (Rev Con) presents an opportunity to revitalize the NPT and build upon broad consensus in the international community that arms control strategies need to be reexamined to reflect a changing world. The challenge is to find the collective will to act and the right mechanism (treaty-based or otherwise) to pursue a viable solution.

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### **Personal Takeaways**

On a personal level, the sixth meeting of the nonproliferation and disarmament study group of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP), held April 7 in Bali, Indonesia, opened my eyes to the extraordinary complexity of international dialogue. A few personal takeaways include:

1. Experts come from different background (academia, military, NGO, think tank, etc.); they have their own interests, careers, and agendas to promote; and some are more closely aligned with their governments than others. Knowing who is

talking is crucial to understanding what they are really saying.

2. I was surprised to learn how many bodies, institutions, agreements, and frameworks exist at various levels to address disarmament and nonproliferation. Each of these tools presents its own set of pros and cons. How an agreement is implemented and which tools are used are just as important as what the agreement is.

3. Ralph Cossa said two things during lunch with the Young Leaders that stuck with me. One was: “You can be a bridge but it means both sides walk over you.” The comments were made in response to the idea of South Korea acting as a third party broker between the US and North Korea. I remember these words well because they succinctly articulate why good intentions alone do not make a foreign policy. If not carefully considered, acting on good intentions may even run counter to one's interests.

4. Cossa also said, “You can't be a neutral third party broker and still be an ally.” Also said in the context of US-North Korea talks, this was another succinct phrase that helped me to understand that in the arena of international relations, every position a country takes is intentional, and that saying yes to one option – even if it means saying yes to ambiguity – also means saying no to another.

5. Idealism vs strategic thinking. Having lived in Japan during and after the March 11, 2011, tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster, I was acutely aware of the drawbacks of nuclear energy prior to this CSCAP meeting. My experience with NGOs and activists in Japan further deepened by reluctance to endorse this energy source, even as an alternative to fossil fuels in the fight to stave off climate change. However, pre-conference readings opened my eyes to the fact that investment in nuclear energy, especially in Southeast Asia, is increasing and will only continue to increase. Russia and China are willing business partners even though buyer countries may lack a robust safety and security culture as well as trained personnel. The further the United States distances itself from nuclear

energy, the more it weakens its ability to impact the global nuclear governance regime. Reducing our domestic investment in nuclear energy could also open the door wider for China and Russia to strengthen economic and political cooperation with countries keen to invest in nuclear energy. As a citizen, how does one weigh the international benefits of continuing to develop nuclear energy against the risks and negative impacts of nuclear energy most heavily felt by local communities? This is a particularly difficult question for me because it pits many of my idealistic values and experiences in grass-roots advocacy against broader, international trends that demand practical and strategic solutions.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you, Pacific Forum, for giving me this glimpse into the world of international dialogue. Although I sometimes struggled to keep pace with the insightful presentations, I feel much more confident in my understanding of the overarching issues confronting nonproliferation and disarmament. I also have a better grasp of the kind of questions I should be asking to further my learning, the strengths and limitations of various international frameworks for cooperation, the multi-layered and complex relationships between countries in the Asia-Pacific, the role of academia and NGOs in supporting constructive dialogue between states, and the value of meetings like CSCAP in exchanging ideas and developing trust.

In my role as High School Program Director at the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council (PAAC), I strive to find ways to relate international affairs to the lives of my students here in Hawaii. I admit, however, that given my background in education and the nonprofit sector, I often feel removed from the issues because I do not understand how decision-makers in government, military, and international institutions operate. Civil society alone is not equipped to tackle the world's challenges. Participating in this CSCAP Study Group has shed light on how professionals in government, military, academia, and cross-national institutions exchange ideas on serious issues with their international counterparts. As a

result, my worldview is broader and more nuanced, and I feel better equipped to think critically and objectively about international issues. I also feel less removed from international issues knowing that civil society does play a role and can have important impacts even at the international level.

*Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of individuals and do not represent any organization.*