

# COLLAPSE OF INF TREATY REFLECTS ACCUMULATING CHALLENGES TO ARMS CONTROL

BY JOSEPH PARKES

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The imminent collapse of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty – the only treaty to eliminate an entire class of nuclear weapons – is symptomatic of the accumulating challenges facing arms control. From the US and Europe to Asia-Pacific, the political, geopolitical, and military logic underpinning the arms control regime is strained, and the survival and extension of existing agreements is in serious doubt.

This crisis in arms control comes at a time when the disruptive potential of emerging technologies is beginning to crystalize. An international effort to avoid the proliferation of hypersonic weapons, counter-space weapons, automation, and missile defense could reinvigorate the global arms control agenda. But by the same measure, technological progress in these fields is a complicating factor, with new weapon capabilities making the path to nuclear arms control more complex.

This reflection piece incorporates key takeaways from discussions held during the April 2019 meeting of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament in the Asia-Pacific.

**The INF treaty is not the first to unravel**

*Key takeaway: The INF treaty has been undermined by the deteriorating international security environment, and by the weak bilateral relationship between Washington and Moscow.*

The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the INF treaty, which bans the US and Russia from developing land-based missiles with a range of between 500 and 5500 km, is in part a result of the parlous state of relations between Washington and Moscow. Each side accuses the other of violating the treaty, and both have opted to pull out rather than continue trying to resolve the dispute.

However, the demise of the INF treaty is not solely a result of recent friction between the two parties, nor is it the first important piece of the world's arms control framework to fall. The end of the INF treaty will be just the latest manifestation of the mounting stresses on the international arms control regime.

**US' withdrawal from ABM treaty set course for crisis**

One key milestone on the road to the current crisis was the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2002. The Bush administration withdrew from the ABM treaty to allow for a post-9/11 push to develop missile defense systems that could protect the US and Europe from threats emanating from 'rogue nations.' The US initially pursued the idea of a new ground-based missile defense system in Europe, before the Obama administration opted to deploy both ship and ashore versions of the existing Aegis missile defense system.<sup>1</sup>

However, rather than as a defense against emerging missile arsenals in the Middle East, Moscow has always viewed US missile defense in Europe as a direct threat to its security. In addition to a general concern over the long-term impact on the strategic balance, Moscow claims that the MK-41 launchers used in the Aegis system can also fire offensive Tomahawk missiles. This would mean that the Aegis ashore site in Romania could secretly be converted into

an offensive capability close to Russia's border.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Moscow argues that the US is violating the INF treaty through its deployment of Aegis missile defense systems in Europe, a position rejected by the US.

Russian wariness of the strategic impact of the US focus on missile defense and the deployment of the Aegis ashore system in Romania, has contributed to a decade-long drive for new nuclear systems. This includes, but is not limited to, the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile which is at the center of the INF treaty dispute. The US argues that this new missile operates at a range prohibited under the INF treaty.<sup>3</sup>

The trajectory of the US-Russia bilateral relationship is a key factor in the inability or unwillingness to preserve the INF treaty. But the strain on the treaty has been building for years, driven by the US and Russia's differing perceptions of their security needs in Europe.

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### **Rising China influencing US response to Russian violations**

*Key conference takeaway: Missile proliferation in Asia poses a major barrier to rescuing the INF treaty, or negotiating a successor deal.*

Only the US and Russia are party to the INF treaty, a reflection of its Cold War origins, but Washington's response to Russian violations is not the only factor pushing the treaty over the brink. Away from the European theatre, there is serious unease in Washington over China's deployment of a plethora of INF-range missiles over the last decade. The rapidly advancing missile arsenal of the PLA Rocket Force is central to Beijing's long-term strategy to check US freedom of movement in the Pacific, and to provide military options in relation to Taiwan.

Unlike the US and Russia, China is not a party to any treaties limiting its missile arsenal; an increasingly intolerable situation for many in US political and military circles. In a speech announcing the US plan to withdraw from the treaty, Secretary of State Pompeo highlighted China's unconstrained ability to develop such missiles, arguing that the US should not “continue to cede this crucial military advantage to revisionist powers like China”.<sup>4</sup>

It is not obvious that land-based INF-range missiles are necessary for the US to counter China's military build-up; the US has an extensive sea- and air-based INF-range missile capability in the Pacific, and basing options are far from straightforward.<sup>5</sup> But leaving the INF Treaty and developing new ground-launched missiles has been framed as an important step to help the US push back against China's increasingly assertive activity in the region.

Even if Washington and Moscow were willing and able to resolve their bilateral differences over the alleged treaty violations, the future of the INF Treaty would look bleak due to the shifting geopolitical context in Asia-Pacific. Indeed, it looks increasingly unlikely that the US will allow its military options to be limited by any international agreements that do not also apply to China. And it is not just the US that is wary; Moscow has also flagged unconstrained missile arsenals in Asia as a cause for concern while its own options remain limited by the INF treaty.<sup>6</sup>

## **US response to INF challenge bodes ill for other agreements**

*Key conference takeaway: Any successor to the INF treaty should be multilateral, including countries like China, India and Pakistan, though reaching such an agreement would be difficult. It is also doubtful that sufficient political will exists to secure the extension of New START.*

The collapse of the INF Treaty has grim implications for the future of arms control, with the New START - the last treaty setting legally-binding limits on US and Russian nuclear arsenals – set to expire in 2021.

By opting to pull out of the treaty rather than continue trying to induce Russia back into compliance, the Trump administration has again revealed its bias towards a rejection of international constraints on US action. The same dynamic could certainly play out when it comes to New START, particularly if John Bolton, current national security advisor and well-known arms control skeptic, remains a key player shaping US decision-making.

The role that China's growing military strength has played in undermining the INF Treaty is also a sign of things to come. Beijing does not share the view that its military development should be subject to limits, and any effort to draw it into a multilateral INF-style treaty would likely be rebuffed. As a result, President Trump's recent announcement that the US will push for China to be involved in future arms control agreements looks like a non-starter, at least on the timeline required to prevent the expiry of New START.<sup>7</sup> The number of warheads in China's nuclear arsenal is an order of magnitude smaller than those of the US and Russia, and Beijing can therefore make a superficially strong case that its inclusion in a New START extension or successor agreement is illogical.

## **Emerging technologies are both an arms control challenge and an opportunity**

*Key conference takeaway: Future arms control negotiations will be more complex due to the development of new weapon systems that make use of emerging technologies.*

The arms control regime is wobbling just as the need for a new era of arms control is becoming more apparent. The race is on to develop and deploy new military technologies, ranging from missile defense and automation to hypersonic and counter-space weapons, and heading off the risks of an all-out arms race will require multilateral arms control.

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Grappling with the risks posed by emerging military technologies could add fresh impetus to arms control at a time when major powers have wavering faith in its relevance to mitigating their nuclear security concerns. At best, working to control the proliferation of new technologies, and doing so in recognition of the new geopolitical environment, could reinvigorate nuclear arms control. Early signs are not positive, and it looks more likely that the malaise afflicting nuclear arms control, and the factors driving it, will curtail efforts to control the spread of new weapons.

India provided fresh evidence of this negative trajectory in March 2019 by carrying out a surprise test of an anti-satellite weapon. The success of “Mission Shakti” makes India the fourth country to have demonstrated this capability, but the first to have carried out a

kinetic interceptor test since the US in 2008. Several other countries with advanced rocket programs plausibly have the ability to join this club, and they would be breaching no treaties or agreements should they wish to do so. By further weakening the norm against testing counterspace weapons, and by drawing only tepid criticism from the US while doing so, Mission Shakti likely demonstrates that a ban on future tests is now out of reach.<sup>8</sup>

### **A signpost for the road ahead**

*Key conference takeaway: The current strategic nuclear and arms control landscape is worrisome, and the pattern of relations between the major powers offers little room for optimism.*

The global arms control architecture is facing an array of threats, from the long-term divergence of US and Russian security interests in the European theater, to concern over China's advancing military capabilities and the shift in the US government's approach under the Trump administration. It now looks inevitable that the INF treaty will end when the US' six-month notice of withdrawal expires in August this year. Meanwhile, the unrealistic suggestion that China should participate in any extension indicates that New START is also in serious trouble.

One important indicator of the likely direction will be whether, and how rapidly, the US opts to develop and deploy new ground-launched INF-range missiles after leaving the INF treaty. If not accompanied by diplomacy in support of a new arms control deal, an immediate US move toward deploying new capabilities in Europe and/or the Asia-Pacific would be a sure sign that the missile arms race is set to intensify. This would have serious negative implications for regional and global security over the next decade.

[1]<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Phasedadaptiveapproach>

[2]<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/world/urope/russia-nato-us-romania-missile-defense.html>

[3]<https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/speeches-interviews/item/1923-director-of-national-intelligence-daniel-coats-on-russia-s-inf-treaty-violation>

[4]<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/12/287873.htm>

[5]<https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/in-a-post-inf-treaty-world-the-united-states-must-consider-its-basing-options-in-asia/>

[6]<https://www.ft.com/content/aea2ceae-02b7-11e9-99df-6183d3002ee1>

[7][https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-orders-staff-to-prepare-arms-control-push-with-russia-and-china/2019/04/25/c7f05e04-6076-11e9-9412-daf3d2e67c6d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-orders-staff-to-prepare-arms-control-push-with-russia-and-china/2019/04/25/c7f05e04-6076-11e9-9412-daf3d2e67c6d_story.html)

[8]<https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/the-international-consequences-of-indias-anti-satellite-test>

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