

The end of the INF Treaty?

A pillar of European security architecture at risk

SUMMARY

The US administration announced on 1 February 2019 that it was suspending its obligations under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, with effect from 2 February 2019, and that it was giving Russia six months' notice of complete withdrawal. Russia reacted by announcing that it was also suspending its obligations under the Treaty. Both parties said they would begin developing new nuclear-capable missiles banned by the treaty. The 1987 INF Treaty is a landmark nuclear-arms-control treaty between the United States (US) and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) that eliminated and prohibited ground-launched intermediate ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5 500 km. The US announcement follows years of allegations that the Russian Federation has acted in breach of the agreement. Russia, for its part, has also accused the US of violating the treaty. Both deny the allegations. Moreover, both parties consider that the agreement puts their countries at a strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis other nuclear powers, especially China. The parties' announcements undermine a cornerstone of the European security order. The signing of the INF Treaty in 1987 led to the removal and destruction of nearly 3 000 US and Soviet short-, medium- and intermediate-range nuclear-capable missiles stationed in or aimed at Europe. The EU has called on the US to consider the consequences of its possible withdrawal from the INF for its own security, the security of its allies and that of the whole world. The EU has also called on both the US and Russia to remain engaged in constructive dialogue to preserve the INF Treaty, and on Russia to address the serious concerns regarding its compliance with the treaty. NATO considers Russia to be in violation of the INF Treaty, and the alliance has called on Russia to return urgently to full and verifiable compliance with the agreement. Any redeployment of intermediate-range missiles will put Europe once more in the line of fire of strategic nuclear weapons. If the INF Treaty is abrogated, Europeans will be faced with stark choices all carrying inherent security risks, including engaging in a deployment race with Russia, or refusing re-deployment of US missiles on European soil, potentially leaving European countries exposed to Russian intimidation. Efforts over the next six months will focus on preserving the INF Treaty against all odds.



Contents

- The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty
- Withdrawing from the INF Treaty
- A way forward?
- The significance of the INF Treaty for Europe
- NATO and EU positions on the INF Treaty
- Outlook

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

The Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on the elimination of their intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles, commonly referred to as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces or [INF Treaty](#), was signed by US President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, at the time General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, on 8 December 1987. The [treaty](#), which required the US and USSR to eliminate and permanently give up all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5 500 kilometres, entered into force on 1 June 1988. By the implementation deadline of 1 June 1991, the two parties had together destroyed a total of [2 692](#) short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missiles. It marked the first elimination of an entire category of weapons capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Following the break-up of the USSR at the end of 1991, Russia took on the USSR's obligations under the INF Treaty; Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine are also active participants in the process of implementing the treaty.



Withdrawing from the INF Treaty

The INF Treaty is of unlimited duration, but contains a withdrawal clause that states that each party shall 'have the right to withdraw ... if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardised its supreme interests'. The US first alleged in its July 2014 [Compliance Report](#) that Russia was in violation of its INF Treaty obligations 'not to possess, produce, or flight-test' a ground-launched cruise missile ... with a range capability of 500 km to 5 500 km' or 'to possess or produce launchers of such missiles'. Subsequent State Department assessments in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 repeated these allegations. US concerns focus on the ground-launched cruise missile known as the SSC-8/9M729, which Russia has [deployed](#) at two sites. The US has raised the matter with Russia repeatedly. On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the signing of the INF Treaty on 8 December 2017, the Trump Administration announced an [INF Treaty integrated strategy](#), setting out [economic and military measures](#) to counter alleged Russian violations of the treaty, including options for the development of conventional, ground-launched, intermediate-range missile systems. This is also reflected in the [US nuclear posture review](#) released in February 2018. On 20 October 2018, President Trump [announced](#) his administration's intention to 'terminate' the agreement, with reference to Russia's [noncompliance](#) and China's development of intermediate-range nuclear missiles. On 4 December 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared Russia to be in '[material breach](#)' of the agreement, giving Russia 60 days to return to compliance, following which the US would suspend its obligations under the treaty. Finally, on 2 February 2019, the [US government](#) gave Russia six months' notice of complete withdrawal from the treaty.

[Russia](#) reciprocated by [announcing](#) that it was also suspending observance of the Treaty. Russia recently acknowledged the [existence](#) of the cruise missile system that has prompted the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, but has denied that it violates the agreement. Meanwhile, Russia has also questioned US compliance. It has accused the US of placing a [missile defence launch system](#) in Romania that can also be used to fire cruise missiles, with plans to deploy identical launchers in [Poland](#). Washington rejects Russia's accusations, arguing that the [Aegis Ashore](#) missiles defence facility in question is not a prohibited intermediate-range missile launcher.

In addition, however, there are important geostrategic reasons why the parties would want to be unencumbered by the constraints imposed by the INF Treaty. Both the [US](#) and [Russia](#) have expressed frustration with the fact that the INF Treaty does not extend to other countries with intermediate-range missile capabilities, especially [nuclear powers](#). China, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea are all developing intermediate-range missiles or weapon systems. [China's](#) arsenal of this type of weapons is of particular concern. China has so far [rejected](#) invitations to join the INF Treaty, as it would not be able to maintain its regional strategy of sealing off the East and South China Seas from US intervention and would lose its capacity for ['regional power projection'](#). [Opposition](#) to the INF Treaty has been voiced ever since it was signed in 1987. Moreover, [key members](#) of the current US administration are essentially [opposed](#) to any form of [arms control](#).

A way forward?

The US has called for complete and verifiable destruction of Russia's INF-violating missiles, their launchers and associated equipment, but also remains open to [talks](#) with Moscow. [Experts](#) believe the INF Treaty could still be saved if both sides agreed to respond to the other's compliance concerns and allowed for mutual inspections. However, [experts](#) also acknowledge that the parties lack political will to save the treaty. Making the INF Treaty [multilateral](#) to bring in other nuclear powers in possession of relevant missile systems would be another option, but would obviously depend on the political will of those countries, and has been dismissed as ['not realistic'](#). [Other experts](#) consider that the overall security environment has changed so much that the INF Treaty in its current form no longer serves the parties' interests and would have to be updated to retain its value.

The significance of the INF Treaty for Europe

[Ballistic missiles](#) are rockets with a trajectory that, after a propulsion phase, is unpowered. This trajectory – referred to as ballistic – is dependent on the force of gravity and resistance due to friction with the atmosphere alone. The free fall follows a parabolic curve whose range depends on the initial speed and the propulsion angle. Ballistic missiles are classified by their range. Cruise missiles, by contrast, are propelled until impact and include a guidance system. Both types of missile can carry a warhead made up of conventional or nuclear weapons.

The INF Treaty put an end to the cold-war missile crisis between Moscow and Washington that lasted from 1978 to 1985. In the mid-1970s, the USSR began to deploy SS-20 intermediate-range missiles on its territory, a new kind of missile with a 2 300 km range that put all of Europe within its reach. In 1979, NATO responded with the ['Double Track'](#) decision. On the one hand, NATO would deploy US ground-launched systems comprising 108 Pershing II launchers and 464 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCM), all with single nuclear warheads, in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. On the other hand, arms control negotiations with the USSR would henceforth specifically include long-range theatre nuclear systems. The stationing of US nuclear missiles in [western Europe](#) led to [major protests](#) and social unrest in the early 1980s, as part of the campaign for nuclear disarmament. Intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles are considered to be particularly [dangerous](#) for crisis stability. They are known as 'first-strike weapons', whose launch cannot be detected and that take only a few minutes to reach their targets, thereby reducing warning time. Given that these types of missile can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads, they raise the threat of a nuclear war in the event of a false attack warning. Experts have pointed out that the [Soviet Union](#) originally designed these weapons specifically to fight a war with nuclear weapons

in Europe, to hit targets in Europe, including ports, airports, seaports and NATO command posts, and to cut off the ability of the US to defend Europe.

NATO and EU positions on the INF Treaty

[NATO](#) allies have backed the US finding that Russia is 'in material breach of its obligations under the INF Treaty'. NATO has also been forceful in condemning Russia's violation of the INF Treaty as eroding 'the foundation of effective arms control' and 'undermining Allied security'. NATO considers this 'part of Russia's broader pattern of behaviour', 'intended to weaken the overall Euro-Atlantic security architecture'. It has called on Russia to 'return urgently to full and verifiable compliance' and to 'preserve the INF Treaty'. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the Alliance will come up with '[credible deterrence and defence](#)' should Russia continue to breach the INF Treaty.

The [EU](#) considers the INF Treaty to have been a pillar of European security architecture since it entered into force 30 years ago. It has called on the US and the Russian Federation to remain engaged in constructive dialogue to preserve the INF Treaty and ensure its full and verifiable implementation. The EU has further [called on the Russian Federation](#) to address serious concerns regarding its compliance with the INF Treaty in a substantial and transparent way. It has also invited the United States to consider the consequences of its possible withdrawal from the INF for its own security, the security of its allies and that of the whole world.

Outlook

If the INF Treaty is abrogated, Europe faces a range of [stark choices](#) that, at worst, according to [experts](#), could split the NATO alliance or even EU Member States. EU Member States could opt for a deployment race with Russia, fuelled by US missiles, in a return to a pre-INF Treaty scenario. The military risk of this option would be significant, especially since the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has said that Russia would target any [European countries](#) that agree to host US missiles. Alternatively, EU Member States could jointly reject the deployment of US missiles, a move that would further strain the transatlantic alliance, and potentially make Europe subject to Russian intimidation, even though the [overall balance of power](#) in Europe is still in NATO's favour. Finally, some EU Members – 'a coalition of the willing' – could opt to deploy US missiles, while others could refuse to host US weapons, thus dividing the EU and potentially splitting the NATO alliance.

Parliament [debated](#) European security and the INF Treaty in plenary on 14 November 2018. The Subcommittee on Security and Defence [exchanged views](#) on threats to the functioning of the INF Treaty on 24 January 2018 and [debated](#) the future of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces on 23 January 2019.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2019.

Photo credits: © elen31 / Fotolia.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

