



The Collapse of the INF Treaty Regime and the Future of European Security

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On August 19, 2019, the United States tested a “conventionally-configured ground-launched cruise missile” in California for the first time in more than three decades. A nuclear version of such a missile, namely the BGM-109G Gryphon, had become operational in 1984, but was eliminated as a result of the conclusion in 1987 of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (better known as the “INF Treaty”). Yet, on August 2nd, that treaty expired, following U.S. withdrawal. Symbolically, this may have brought to an end the period known as the post-Cold War era.

There are fundamental reasons why the INF Treaty eventually collapsed. Irrespective, however, of who – or what – is to be blamed for the demise of the only arms control agreement to have eliminated an entire class of nuclear delivery systems, it is certain that the decision formally to terminate it creates the opportunity for both Russia and the United States freely and openly to develop and deploy in the future ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, which were previously prohibited under the agreement. Such weapons used to be considered as particularly dangerous in a crisis, notably due to their mobility and their potential to hit within minutes targets deep into the European territory. That is why the main purpose of this analysis is to explore what effects the collapse of the INF Treaty might have on European security and what the adequate response might be.

A closer look at the events leading to the current state of affairs reveals that geopolitical factors ultimately played the decisive role in the unraveling of the arms control framework put in place by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and the Soviet Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev. Indeed, geopolitics are back again to haunt America’s allies, who now face security threats that they hoped would remain a thing of the past. The challenge for Europeans at present is to implement a strategy that will effectively address these threats, while avoiding another rift on the continent and with the United States. Staying together will be essential and Washington will have to be

able to foster unity rather than sow division. Like four decades ago during the Euromissiles crisis, respect for allies' concerns and constant transatlantic dialogue as well as cooperation both within NATO and at the level of the European Union are the key ingredients for success.

The Short Chronology of a Slow but Certain Demise

The road to the end of the INF Treaty formally began under the presidency of Barack Obama. In **May 2013**, U.S. officials raised violation concerns with their Russian counterparts for the first time, although the source of the problem had been identified as early as 2008. The United States openly accused Russia of being in breach of its obligations under the treaty “not to possess, produce, or flight-test a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) with a range capability of 500 km to 5,500 km, or to possess or produce launchers of such missiles” in the **July 2014** report published by the State Department’s Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance. As quoted above, the report referred to a banned GLCM, without identifying it more precisely. The violation claim appeared again in the **2015, 2016, 2017** and **2018** reports and was the object of several expert meetings of the Special Verification Commission established pursuant to **Article XIII of the INF Treaty**. It appears that the U.S. administration brought the issue to NATO’s attention for the first time in **January 2014**. In **December 2016**, the system at the center of the controversy, by then identified as the **9M729 Novator missile (NATO code SSC-8)**, was reportedly being deployed from the Kapustin Yar test site to other locations within the Russian Federation.

The Russian diplomatic position oscillated between outright denial of the existence of the controversial missile and the argument that it was anyway conforming to the treaty’s requirements. In **December 2017**, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared during a news conference organized at an OSCE reunion in Vienna that all the charges against Russia regarding the breach of the INF Treaty were groundless and that Moscow remained committed to observing it. Still, according to a **November 2018** statement of the former U.S. Director for National Intelligence Dan Coats, Moscow had been engaged in the covered development of the 9M729, which has a conventional and nuclear warhead capability, since the mid-2000s and had conducted “the flight test program in a way that appeared purposefully designed to disguise the true nature of their testing activity as well as the capability” of the missile. More precisely, “Russia initially flight tested the 9M729 – a ground-based missile – to distances well over 500 kilometers (km) from a fixed launcher [which was permitted under **Article VII.11 of the INF Treaty**, as long as the missile was not ultimately to be used in a ground-based mode]. Russia then tested the same missile at ranges below 500km from a mobile launcher. By putting the two types of tests together, Russia was able to develop a missile that flies to the intermediate ranges prohibited by the INF Treaty and launches from a ground-mobile platform.”

Failure to resolve the dispute in January 2019 during the last meeting of the Special Verification Commission dedicated to this topic triggered the formal mechanism for the termination of this historic agreement for material breach, pursuant to Article 60 of the **Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties**. Thus, on February 1st, 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo officially **announced** the suspension of the United States' participation in the INF Treaty. Simultaneously, the Trump Administration notified America's withdrawal from the treaty in accordance with its **Article XV** at the end of the six-month sunset period, absent Russia's return into compliance. This announcement came after President Donald Trump had taken everyone by surprise on **October 20, 2018**, when he had stated that the U.S. would pull out of the accord.

In a tit-for-tat move, the Russian Government **made a similar suspension decision** in March 2019, while denying once more U.S. allegations. According to Russia, which showed a static display of the missile's container (but not the missile itself) during a **press conference**, the 9M729 is only a version of the 9M728 Iskander system with a range of 490 kilometers and is even 10 kilometers shorter due to lighter components, thereby making it compliant with the INF Treaty. Nevertheless, most experts have been skeptical of Moscow's claim and **have agreed with the U.S. government's conclusion** regarding Russia's violation of the treaty. Moreover, based on the intelligence collected by several of its members, **NATO** has unanimously backed this conclusion, while preparing itself for a post-INF world. That world became a reality on August 2nd, when the United States **proclaimed** their effective withdrawal from the treaty as a result of Russia's refusal to destroy the non-compliant missiles.

INF Treaty's Geopolitical Death Triangle

By taking the decisive step formally to withdraw from the INF Treaty, the Trump administration destroyed a symbol of the end of the Cold War and granted the Kremlin a public relations victory, allowing it to place the blame of the treaty's demise on Washington. That being said, the death of this arms control agreement is the cause of far more complex forces and is rather the result of a tacit agreement than of a unilateral act upon the impulsion of National Security Adviser John Bolton, President Trump's "eminence grise."

Over the years, many Russian military officials and experts have argued that the 1987 accord was outdated. Reflecting views long held in Moscow's defense circles, Viktor Murakhovsky, a retired Russian colonel, defense analyst and editor-in-chief of the Arsenal of the Fatherland magazine, explained in a recent interview with the **National Interest** that "the INF treaty was concluded under very particular circumstances. During that time period, ballistic missiles were practically the only type of intermediate range missiles – cruise missiles were only starting to be developed. ... [T]he purpose of the INF treaty has disappeared from a military-technical standpoint with the development of new weaponry and from a political standpoint with the

expansion of NATO to Russia's borders. For example, if the United States places a destroyer in Estonia's waters, an action that would not violate the treaty, the flying time of its cruise missiles to St. Petersburg will be ten to fifteen minutes. Thus, the treaty is dead. We must bury and forget about it."

As a matter of fact, the INF Treaty has been under fire ever since the years 2000s. Objections against it have had less to do with the U.S.-Russia strategic rivalry and more with China's growing arsenal, which has remained to this date unconstrained by any arms control agreement. In 2007, then-Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov openly challenged the usefulness of the treaty, hinting at Beijing's large number of intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. Despite the recent warming in bilateral relations, one must remember that Russia and China share one of the longest international boundaries and that their common history was punctuated by a series of border conflicts, one of which almost sparked a war in 1969.

True, Moscow has also become increasingly irritated by what it considers as Washington's unwillingness to treat it fairly and pay due attention to its security interests, in particular in its neighborhood and after the U.S. denounced another landmark arms control agreement of the Cold War – the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (or ABM) Treaty. Unsurprisingly, Russia's own allegations of violation of the INF Treaty against the United States have been related *inter alia* to missile defense technologies, including test targets as well as the Aegis Ashore installations forming part of Obama administration's European Phased Adaptive Approach. These installations are the land-based equivalent of a sea-based system (the Aegis Weapon System on the Arleigh Burke Class destroyers and the Ticonderoga Class cruisers), using a similar Mark 41 Vertical Launching System (or Mk 41 VLS). They might, therefore, be capable to launch cruise missiles, not just Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) interceptors. Under the current configuration of the Aegis Ashore Ballistic Missile Defense System ('BMDS'), launching GLCMS would, however, require substantial hardware and software adjustments. In addition, the amendment of the basing agreements with the hosting nations would be necessary, since the system is right now "exclusively defensive nature."

Yet, from the very beginning the challenge to the survival of the INF Treaty came from a triangular geopolitical relationship involving the United States, Russia and, especially, China. The justifications offered by the Trump administration for its February withdrawal decision, that China possesses more than 1,000 INF Treaty-range missiles, but is not a party to the treaty and the call on Beijing in the State Department's August 2nd statement to join a new arms control deal all but confirmed this reality.

China's Consistent Opposition to Multilateral Arms Control

As anticipated, Washington's call fell on deaf ears. In fact, China has consistently refused to enter into any multilateral agreement that would constrain its medium- and intermediate-range arsenal, such as the *Dongfeng* or DF family of ballistic missiles (including the DF-21D "carrier killer" and the DF-26 "Guam killer") and the *Chang Jian* or CJ-10 GLCMs. Beijing has justified its position by the disproportion between its nuclear forces, on the one hand, and those of Russia and the United States, on the other. Although this difference is real, and despite the dual-capable nature of Chinese intermediate-range vectors as well as the collocation of both nuclear and conventional forces raising crisis stability issues, it is impossible to reduce the regional equation in Asia entirely to the nuclear deterrence element.

As repeatedly reminded nowadays in the media, China has been engaged in a more or less "peaceful rise" in the Indo-Pacific for several decades now and the Americans have made no secret of the fact that they perceive Beijing's actions, in particular the military buildup in the South China Sea, as a threat to their interests in the region. The United States *National Security Strategy*, for example, bluntly accuses China of attempting "to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest [U.S.] ability to operate freely in critical commercial zones during peacetime." In the words of *Ankit Panda in The Diplomat*, "Beijing has poured money into ballistic missiles in the short- and intermediate-range categories proscribed by the [INF] treaty, to enable its anti-access/area denial strategy within the so-called first island chain linking Okinawa, Taiwan and the Philippines." For Washington, defending U.S. assets in the region, therefore, requires capabilities that would penetrate China's A2/AD bubble, including advanced air defenses, such as the S-400 air and missile defense system acquired from Russia. Furthermore, the imperatives of extended deterrence call for a more flexible approach, able to reassure the U.S. allies in the region, namely Australia, Japan and South Korea. It is notable that just a day after the United States pulled out of the INF Treaty, the new U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper *said* that he favored "placing ground-launched, intermediate-range missiles in Asia relatively soon." The *test* by the U.S. Navy of the ground-launched *Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missile* in California within just 16 days of the treaty's termination, mentioned in the introduction, clearly shows the Pentagon's resolve.

At the same time, a recent *study* demonstrates that a similar perception of the Chinese missile threat has prevailed in Moscow, too. Leaving aside for one moment the animosity towards NATO, it is a fact that "China's development and deployment of sophisticated ground-launched cruise and short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles has presented a potential threat to Russian territory that Moscow cannot ignore, even if Sino-Russian relations appear to be warm. ... With Russia's male (and primary military) population in decline, nuclear weapons offer an effective means of stopping a large-scale invasion of Siberia by Chinese forces, without the need to stage large-scale military forces along the border areas." At the end of the day, the

rising power in Eurasia is still China, not Russia, especially if one looks at the economic situation, and Moscow must prepare for future uncertainties.

In such circumstances, the demise of the INF Treaty should come as no surprise. Still, without the proper strategy, this end risks leaving Europeans out alone in a new Cold War, making them a collateral victim of the great power competition in Asia. This is exactly what NATO says it wishes to avoid by crafting a “**measured and responsible**” response to the end of the INF Treaty regime. It remains to be seen how this response will ultimately play out.

The Return of Europe’s Old Ghosts

Unfortunately, the collapse of the arms control regime of the Cold War adds a layer of complexity to an already tense global strategic environment, with serious implications for Europe.

First, as illustrated by the 2016 “**Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy**,” there is “a direct connection between European prosperity and Asian security. In light of the economic weight that Asia represents for the EU – and vice versa – peace and stability in Asia are a prerequisite for our prosperity.” Accordingly, any threat to Asian peace and stability, including those coming from China’s disregard for international norms in the South China Sea, is a threat to European prosperity and, ultimately, security. This is even more so for certain European countries, such as **France**, which have overseas territories and populations in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, in addition to vital economic interests.

Second, and most importantly, the reintroduction by Russia of INF-type vectors in Europe itself brings back old memories and fears of a potential split within NATO, with similar repercussions for the European Union. As a result, the two organizations are more than ever called upon to work together to keep the promise of a Europe “whole, free and at peace.”

If the past holds any lessons for the future, it might be useful to recall that at the origin of the Euromissiles crisis, which led to the INF Treaty, was the deployment by the Soviet Union of the SS20 Saber. The SS20 was a highly accurate missile with a target range of approximately 5,000 kilometers, three nuclear warheads and the ability to be launched from mobile platforms, making it nearly impossible for NATO forces to detect and destroy. The most serious effect of the deployment of this missile system was, however, the risk of “decoupling” Europe’s security from that of the United States to the extent that the new Soviet system was not threatening U.S. territory. The daunting question of whether Washington would risk nuclear war if Berlin or another major European city was attacked suddenly reemerged. In response, NATO adopted in 1979 the “dual-track” decision, involving parallel negotiations with Moscow for the limitation of intermediate-range nuclear forces and the placement by

the U.S. of Pershing II ballistic missiles and the Gryphon GLCMs in Western Europe. Combining the stick and the carrot, the West sent then a clear signal to the USSR that negotiations were possible, but also that it was decided to stay united in front of the threat.

Consequently, a first lesson to be learnt from the INF Treaty's history is that alliance solidarity played an essential role in obtaining a favorable outcome for European security. As several experts at the [Brookings Institution](#) have noted, a treaty negotiation that formally took place between two actors was eventually successful and led to the elimination of all the contentious missiles on both sides because it was, in reality, "a three-way negotiation, with NATO allies being a non-voting, but very concerned and on occasion vocal partner in the enterprise."

Of course, the parallel with the Euromissiles crisis cannot extend too far. The threat coming from Russia's deployment of the SSC-8 is different from that of the 1970s' deployment of the SS20s, not least because the specter of nuclear war is thankfully far more remote than during the Cold War. The threat exists, since Moscow may attempt to take advantage of this new dual-capable intermediate-range capability within the framework of a coercive escalatory strategy in Europe. Still, Moscow's tactics of hybrid warfare used during the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 lead to the conclusion that the most serious and immediate danger nowadays is somewhat of another nature. Paradoxically, this challenge is not even "decoupling" of the transatlantic security, although some doubts may legitimately persist. The greatest threat to European security is division, because any division is likely to be easily exploited for the purpose of a return to the partition of the continent into spheres of influence. Based on previous experience, it appears that the response to the Kremlin's aggressive posture should follow the same bold strategy of deterrence and dialogue of the 1980s. While NATO will – and should – lead the way, the European Union also has its own role in this mission.

A Common Euro-Atlantic Approach to the post-INF World

NATO's primary mission of collective defense and the security guarantee that it offers due to U.S. participation are unique. Europe cannot stand alone against Russia – or China, but neither can the United States. They need each other. The truth that strong alliances are America's most valuable asymmetric advantage over its strategic competitors is worth repeating. This means, however, that Washington must be able to maintain such strong alliances, which requires respect for the views and concerns of U.S. allies and the ability to bring everyone together around those common goals and values that underpin both NATO and the European Union.

Notwithstanding some difficult moments in the transatlantic relationship throughout history (and not just under the Trump administration), the Atlantic Alliance has proved to be resilient. Significantly, NATO was capable to speak with one

voice about Russia's responsibility for the demise of the INF Treaty and swiftly to adopt a "balanced, coordinated and defensive package of measures to ensure NATO's deterrence and defence posture remains credible and effective." According to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, this package of military measures contemplates additional exercises, the enhancement of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, air and missile defense and conventional capabilities as well as a "safe, secure and effective" nuclear deterrent.

It is very important to observe that NATO does not intend to mirror Russia's actions and that it has absolutely "no intention to deploy new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe." This shows that the Atlantic Alliance learnt a second valuable lesson from the Euromissiles crisis and the massive demonstrations in many Western capitals in the 1980s against the deployment of the Pershing and cruise missiles: the nuclear question is very divisive for the European public opinion. There are certain calls for a European nuclear deterrent, which precisely miss this point. At the moment, there is no credible alternative to U.S. extended deterrence. One other reason is that EU Member States with nuclear weapons (meaning only France, after BREXIT) are more likely to preserve their historically independent nuclear deterrence policy, despite the extension of vital interests beyond the national territory to encompass Europe's integrity and cohesion, and notwithstanding the mutual defense clause in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union. There are limitations to what Europe can achieve in the name of its "strategic autonomy." Nevertheless, there are also ways in which NATO and the EU can work together to diffuse crises and deter any form of aggression against European States.

Recognizing that "the security of EU and NATO are inter-connected," the two organizations sealed a strategic partnership during a ceremony at NATO's July 2016 Warsaw Summit. The substance of that partnership covers seven concrete areas of enhanced cooperation, including the countering of hybrid threats, operational cooperation at sea and on migration, cybersecurity, defense capabilities, industry and research, joint exercises and support for Eastern and Southern partners' capacity-building efforts. In its own official documents, the European Union External Action Service has underscored the importance of this partnership and its contribution to it in unambiguous terms: "EU-NATO cooperation constitutes an integral pillar of the EU's work aimed at strengthening European security and defense, as part of the implementation of the EU Global Strategy. It also contributes to Trans-Atlantic burden sharing. A stronger EU and a stronger NATO are mutually reinforcing."

Undoubtedly, in a post-INF world in which a rapid military response to hybrid warfare is critical, "two is better than one." This is the third lesson of the Euromissiles crisis, when all allies stood together despite a concerted and exceptional Soviet propaganda campaign in many Western countries. In this respect, the European Union can, for example, contribute to countering Moscow's disinformation attempts, such as the Kremlin's false concession – not to deploy Russian missiles unless the

United States does so first – in a situation of its own making similar to that of the 1980s. A **June 2019** report of the European Council on Foreign Relations rightly cites the building of “domestic resilience to info wars” as a necessary dimension of the European “strategic autonomy” and a useful contribution to the common EU-NATO fight against hybrid threats. Moreover, in terms of concrete defense capabilities, the EU can rely on the two pillars of its Common Security and Defense Policy, namely the **Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)** mechanism and the **European Defense Fund**. To be successful though, European policies and mechanisms must be inclusive and avoid fracturing Europe along Cold War lines, by addressing the security concerns of all Member States and rejecting a two-tier Europe.

Conclusion

In brief, be it within NATO or at EU level, “united” is the name of the game. To win, the United States and their European allies must participate in periodic consultations and discuss all the topics of mutual interest. Among those topics, the potential deployment of new American intermediate-range systems and the evolution of the BMDS architecture will probably be the most contentious. To maintain transatlantic unity, the best solution at present appears to be one that effectively ensures the defense of Europe and brings in additional means of conventional deterrence, as permitted by **Article 51 of the United Nations Charter**, while stopping short of an unwanted offensive arms race in the region. From this perspective, strengthening missile defense, especially against cruise missiles, would certainly be wise. In contrast, placing intermediate-range vectors on European soil, notably with nuclear warheads, would be very difficult and divisive. That is why any potential future deployment of new U.S. ground-launched capabilities, including the Navy’s Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missile tested in August and the Army’s next-generation artillery weapon called the **Precision Strike Missile**, should be the result of a unanimous decision with allies and should avoid playing into Russia’s encirclement narrative. Happily, NATO seems to have already made the right choice and U.S. officials have swiftly indicated that the recent GLCM test in California involved a different launching system than the one used for the Aegis Ashore BMDS.

Finally, Europe – and the transatlantic community – cannot stay united unless military and political measures are coupled with diplomacy. This is the last and most valuable lesson of the Euromissiles crisis. Undeniably, U.S. diplomatic engagement not just with allies in Europe and Asia, but also with Russia and China is necessary in order to diffuse tensions, avoid misperceptions and built a minimum level of trust to avert conflict. Notwithstanding the return of great power competition in global affairs, the United States and their allies should prevent another confrontation akin to a Cold War 2.0. Preservation of the strategic arms control architecture in place today may help in order to achieve such an outcome.

After the end of INF Treaty, the next test for transatlantic and European cohesion will be the fate of the New START, due to expire in 2021. Its extension under the current terms for five more years enjoys wide support on the old continent, as well as in the U.S. Congress. Due to its verification mechanism, the New START provides a unique opportunity for Russia and the U.S. to maintain transparency over their nuclear arsenals, thereby reducing the risk of accidental war, in addition to a framework for strategic dialogue. Finally, it allows for more time to discuss emerging technologies, notably hypersonic weapons, in view of concluding a more comprehensive agreement in the future, which is precisely the declared objective of the White House. Accordingly, the Trump administration should carefully consider this option, because any other option in the present circumstances would force NATO and, primarily, the United States to make painful concessions in the absence of a strong negotiating position. This coupled with the risk of another dangerous arms race would not just fracture the Atlantic Alliance, it would make everyone less secure. Let's hope that America and Europe will rise to this as well as to the other challenges to come.

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