

U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty

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U.S. Withdrawal

President Donald Trump has announced that the United States will withdraw from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. His national security advisor, John Bolton, relayed this to officials in Moscow during a visit that began on October 21, although an official notice of withdrawal was not provided.

Under the INF Treaty, the United States and Soviet Union agreed to ban all land-based ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. The ban applied to missiles with both nuclear and conventional warheads, but it did not apply to sea-based or air-delivered missiles. When implementing the treaty, the Soviet Union destroyed 1,846 missiles, including 654 three-warhead SS-20 missiles. The United States destroyed 846 single-warhead missiles. Both sides completed their reductions by 1991.

The United States has recently indicated that Russia is violating the treaty by developing and deploying a new intermediate-range, land-based cruise missile. This accusation has appeared in the State Department's annual report on arms control compliance since 2014. Russia has denied the accusation and has responded with accusations of U.S. noncompliance. The United States has refuted each of the Russian accusations. Because the Administration outlined an integrated strategy to bring Russia back into compliance in December 2017, many observers were surprised by the timing of this announcement.

The INF treaty has an unlimited duration, but either party can withdraw, after giving six-months' notice, if "extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests." The President can make this determination, and provide this notice, without consulting with or receiving the approval of Congress.

President Trump indicated that the U.S. withdrawal was a reaction to Russia's INF violation; he also noted that China is not a party to the treaty or bound by its limits. Supporters and critics of this decision both acknowledge that U.S. withdrawal will have broader implications—for U.S./Russian relations, for

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U.S. and allied security, for NATO cohesion and cooperation with allies in Asia, and for the U.S.-Russia arms control process.

Rationale and Reaction

Some analysts agree with the President's decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty as a response to Russia's noncompliance. They note that the United States has sought to convince Russia to return to compliance for several years, and that it no longer makes sense for the United States to be bound by INF if Russia is violating it.

Others, however, have raised concerns about whether the United States should take the first step in terminating the treaty. Stephen Rademaker, a former official in the Bush Administration, noted during testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in July 2014 that Russia might "welcome a U.S. decision to terminate the treaty," and it would "be a mistake to react in ways that will be seen by them as a reward rather than as a punishment." He added that "since Russia so clearly wants out, we should make sure that they alone pay the political and diplomatic price of terminating the treaty."

National Security Advisor Bolton has supported U.S. withdrawal from INF for some time. In a 2014 op-ed, he and John Yoo argued that the United States should withdraw and pursue the development and deployment of new land-based INF-range missiles. They, and others, argue this would not only allow the United States to deploy missiles in Europe to counter the Russian threat, but also to respond to China's deployment of thousands of missiles of INF-range. Admiral Harry Harris, then the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, made this point in 2017 during a hearing before Senate Armed Services Committee, noting that "restrictions on conventional land-based weapons are hindering the U.S. military's ability to keep up with China."

Still other arms-control experts have argued that U.S. withdrawal could do more harm than good for U.S. and allied security interests. They make the case that Russia, absent treaty constraints, could expand its deployment of INF-range cruise missiles and deploy intermediate-range ballistic missiles to threaten U.S. allies. They also dispute that the United States needs a land-based missile to respond to either Russia or China; the United States can cover targets in both Europe and Asia with sea-based and air-delivered missiles, without violating INF. They note that even if the United States develops a new land-based missile, U.S. allies in Europe and Asia might be unwilling to host the missile on their soil; disputes over deployment of INF-range missiles disrupted NATO in the 1980s and could undermine alliance cohesion again. As a result, they argue U.S. withdrawal could leave Russia as the only party to benefit from the elimination of the treaty limits. They maintain that the United States should continue to exchange information with Russia, pursue a diplomatic solution, implement economic sanctions, and even begin research into new U.S. capabilities, essentially implementing the strategy outlined by the Trump Administration in late 2017.

Congressional Reaction

Several Members of Congress have commented on the pending U.S. withdrawal from INF. Senator Tom Cotton, who has long called for the United States to develop a new land-based INF-range missile, praised the decision, noting that "the Russians are openly cheating, and the Chinese are stockpiling missiles because they're not bound by it at all." Senator Rand Paul reportedly stated that it is a "big, big mistake to flippantly get out of this historic agreement" and suggested that the Administration "appoint nuclear negotiators to work on updating and expanding the pact." Senator Robert Menendez also criticized the decision, noting that, although Russia is clearly responsible for the "degradation" of the treaty, the U.S. withdrawal would allow Russia to produce and deploy more intermediate range missiles to threaten U.S. allies in Europe. Senator Bob Corker also reportedly warned that the U.S. withdrawal could allow Russia

“to move ahead of us quickly,” but he suggested that the President’s statement could be “just a precursor to try to get Russia to come into compliance.”

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