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### **Can the INF Treaty still be saved?**

**A pessimistic assessment on the occasion of its upcoming 30th anniversary**

Original                      Ist der INF-Vertrag noch zu retten?  
Eine pessimistische Bestandsaufnahme zum nahenden  
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## **Can the INF Treaty still be saved?**

### **A pessimistic assessment on the occasion of its upcoming 30th anniversary**

**Things are not looking good for the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. This conclusion is mainly based on the interrelation of strategic offensive and strategic defensive postures. In pursuing its "America First" policy, the new U.S. Administration is unlikely to do things by halves with regard to both its offensive and defensive forces, as a result of which the INF dossier is now very much in troubled waters.**

The original agreement remains unchanged with regard to all ground-launched intermediate-range missiles, which by definition have a range capability of between 500 km and 5,500 km: ZERO for Russia and ZERO for the United States. According to the old and the new U.S. Administration, Russia is no longer adhering to this zero option agreement. And there are growing allegations of non-compliance. Since February 2017, Russia is reported to have stationed two battalions equipped with the new SSC<sup>1</sup>-8 cruise missile, a class of weapons prohibited by the Treaty. The reader (without access to classified information) may well ask whether there are any pictures proving the existence of these battalions. What exactly do these new weapons look like? There may (and will) be a good reason why Russia is withholding such information from the media. The fact remains, however, that broad public support in the West to move away from the INF Treaty, i.e. as a result of offensive non-compliant countermeasures, will be difficult without sufficient public information.

### **How significant is Russia's apparent violation of the Treaty?**

There is, of course, no simple answer to this question. From the *political* point of view, it is of vital significance. This was the decision reached by the United States in summer 2014 when it publicly accused Russia of non-compliance. Since then, it has been clear that a new price has been set for the future of the INF Treaty. Russia can

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<sup>1</sup> Surface-to-Surface Cruise Missile

return to compliance with the INF Treaty. Otherwise, the United States will, in all probability, react in a less than friendly manner.

Are two battalions (equipped with a maximum of 48 cruise missiles) of *military* significance within a broad Eurasian context? Probably not. Four-star General Selva, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, D.C., stated on 18 July that the Russian side would not benefit in Europe from the new intermediate-range missile. The situation would, however, be quite different if there were ten or twenty (road-mobile) battalions. It is unclear what such a statement can achieve. The military necessity, from the Russian point of view and communicated for years by Russia, of (permanently) targeting *all* Western missile defence sites, should at least be acknowledged. It is the author's view that there is an unwillingness to address this price of missile defence. It would be interesting to ask whether and how the United States would have officially dealt with Russian non-compliance *without* the crisis over Crimea and eastern Ukraine. It must be emphasised, however, that Russian non-compliance was officially recorded for the first time in summer 2014 and not earlier.

### **The increasingly difficult context of U.S. missile defence**

Strategic missile defence is and will continue to be an issue that Russia and the West are unable to resolve. This paper presents the view that in the foreseeable future the problem of a (global) missile defence architecture moving closer to Russia's front door cannot be solved politically. An operational solution would be conceivable through "coexistence" in one form or another, which would be governed by complicated cooperation procedures. The necessary coordination discussions have come to nothing.

In terms of cooperation with Russia, which is still desirable given the ballistic potential of some states, NATO has to accept the fact that the altered political landscape has rendered decisions reached at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010 largely superfluous.

There are different ways to address this issue. It is a realistic assumption that the new U.S. Administration will not hesitate to focus its missile defence capabilities specifically on Russia (and China). What this would mean for NATO members situated closest to Russia remains to be seen. For this reason, the United States may seek separate agreements with individual partners (such as Poland) not least because of a lack of consensus within the Alliance. In doing so, the Trump

Administration would follow the Bush II Administration, which at the time was bilaterally planning missile defence capabilities in Poland and the Czech Republic. Such capabilities took the form of strategic long-range radar in the Czech Republic. Perhaps we will see the plans redrafted in these countries or elsewhere.

Moscow could then claim from some kind of moral high ground that it had always known the West's "true" intentions and foreseen such a reorientation of missile defence. This would result in a difficult situation for all Allies in Europe. European critics of missile defence would to some extent have the upper hand.

Up to now, such complex strategic aspects have not affected the general public in Europe. This may be because of other more urgent problems such as migration. The issue still has to be resolved, however.

### **INF Preservation Act**

Legislation known as the INF Preservation Act has been introduced to both houses of the U.S. Congress. The purpose of this act is to show the other side the "instruments", which the U.S. hopes will force Moscow to return to compliance with the INF Treaty. According to the United States, a clear material breach of the INF Treaty gives it the right to suspend application of the INF Treaty's verification regime. As long as Russia remains non-compliant, a number of (drastic) offensive and defensive measures will be initiated. Up to USD 100 million will be provided for the development of a road-mobile intermediate-range cruise missile capable of delivering a nuclear payload, as well as up to USD 500 million to strengthen defensive capabilities and facilitate the transfer of intermediate-range missiles to Allies. Within a period of one year, the new offensive cruise missile will be ready for testing. In addition to that, a report will be submitted after 120 days on the possible reallocation of the Tomahawk Missile, Standard Missile 3, Standard Missile 6, Long-Range Stand-Off Cruise Missile and Army Tactical Missile System for use as ground-launched intermediate-range missiles.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this bill: 1) In technical terms, there is a fine line between adherence to and breach of the INF Treaty. Based on the existing manifold weapons arsenal, a new intermediate-range missile can be ready for use at the end of the year (at the latest). 2) As understandable as the Preservation Act may be given the threat scenario, it plays right into Moscow's hands. The reason for this is that for years Moscow has been convinced (and since 2014 making the accusation)

that the new missile defence installations (sea- and ground-launched) could also be used for offensive purposes (if required, within a short conversion time). This would substantiate the view already expressed that missile defence sites close to Russia would pose a serious problem for politico-strategic stability.

### **SS-20 reloaded**

The quiver of the INF Preservation Act contains another arrow, namely the requirement that the new Russian RS-26 rocket be reviewed. The purpose of this is to determine whether, as an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), it falls under the New START Treaty and its inspection system, or whether it constitutes a further violation of the INF Treaty because it was also tested in the intermediate range with varying warheads.

These intermediate-range missile tests of the RS-26 (also known as "Rubezh", meaning limit or boundary) in 2012 and 2013 are well documented and are always contained in detailed analyses of the crisis concerning the INF Treaty. The Obama Administration had decided, however, to focus on the breach of treaty caused by the new cruise missile. The author believes that there are several reasons for this. First, there was another RS-26 test in the "normal" intercontinental range (> 5,500 km). Second, Russia had planned a formal presentation of the RS-26 missile at the end of November 2015. Third, testing ICBMs in the intermediate range is common practice (particularly within the context of missile defence testing) and has always been possible (primarily by means of a "depressed" or "lofted" flight profile).

In 2017, the situation was unclear. Neither the planned presentation took place nor have the first RS-26 missiles been deployed. It is important, therefore, to consider some basic parameters. First, it should be stated that the 5,500-km limit, which is the borderline between ICBMs and intermediate-range missiles, was defined by the two nuclear superpowers. It results from the minimum direct distance (via the North Pole) between northwest Russia and the northeast of the United States. The 5,500-km limit is basically irrelevant for the Eurasian land mass. The distance between Irkutsk (originally planned for the stationing of the first RS-26 missiles) and Berlin is 5,800 km (which is exactly the missile's nominal range). Second, the planned RS-26 missile is evidently a kind of "reincarnation" of the road-mobile SS-20 missile – which was basically the two-stage intermediate-range version of a three-stage ICBM. Not to

forget that the SS-20 could have been used all the time as an ICBM (>5,500 km), depending on the payload.

It should again be emphasised, therefore, that in technical terms there is a fine line between adherence to and breach of the INF Treaty. The limit of 5,500 km (as with that of 500 km, such as in the case of Russia's Iskander system) is predestined to become the subject of military technological variation and, consequently, of political dispute depending on the agenda.

Russia's agenda concerning the RS-26 missile is not known to us. Moscow will (or must) focus on other, more important, defence projects. However, we can assume that Russia is capable of deploying a (some) new two-stage ballistic missile(s) within a year which could pose a threat to targets across Eurasia.

### **A peaceful abandonment of the INF Treaty?**

Would it be possible to have a scenario in which both parties mutually agree to withdraw from the INF Treaty? Both parties could argue that it would be quite "unfair" if "all the others" (such as China, India, Pakistan, Iran, etc.) have ground-launched intermediate-range missiles with the exception of Russia and the United States. Particularly vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China, the banned missiles would be a useful supplement to the Russian and American strategic force posture.

This approach (like the other approach dealt with briefly by the United Nations ten years ago of a multilateralisation of the INF Treaty) is possible, but becoming increasingly unlikely.

In the meantime, the political price in question has become too high. Russia will not abandon its fundamental opposition to missile defence. Simultaneously, it will further seek to keep the alleged INF Treaty infringements nebulous. In 2014, the United States decided to respond officially to the alleged breach of treaty. Washington will soon have to make a decision since time is passing. As already mentioned, the United States has adopted a clear position which, from today's perspective, further reduces the likelihood of its adhering to the INF Treaty. It is very likely, however, that Moscow will pursue its objective of blaming Washington for the failure of the INF Treaty after Washington unilaterally terminated the ABM Treaty in 2002.

For this reason, it is vitally important to fully discuss Russia's violation of the INF Treaty within NATO and all member states on the basis of clear facts. A minimum operational goal to be achieved will be a common understanding concerning the

ongoing infringement by Russia. We still have quite a way to go in order to achieve this goal. In addition, a consensus on a kind of Double-Track Decision 2.0 (nuclear force modernisation plus negotiations) is unrealistic.

Both parties will try, in any case, to score as many political points as possible in the increasingly complicated situation. What military "solutions" are possible will ultimately be decided primarily by Washington and Moscow. What we already know, however, is that a possible failure of the INF Treaty and the emergence of a new (nuclear) arms race will not in any way improve Europe's security.