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U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty: What's Next?

U.S. Withdrawal

On August 2, 2019, the United States withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. It had notified Russia of its intent to withdraw on February 2, 2019, and, consistent with Article XV of the treaty, the withdrawal took effect six months later. The United States withdrew from the treaty in response to Russia's deployment of an INF-range ground-launched cruise missile, which violated the treaty's ban on missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometers (see CRS Report R43832, *Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress*).

President Trump first indicated that the United States would withdraw from INF on October 20, 2018. He not only cited Russia's violation, but also argued that the United States is at a disadvantage with respect to China because the latter is not bound by the treaty's limits. On December 4, 2018, after a meeting of NATO's foreign ministers, Secretary of State Pompeo declared that Russia was in material breach of the treaty and announced that the United States would suspend its obligations, effective in 60 days, "unless Russia returns to full and verifiable compliance." This 60-day period ended on February 2, 2019.

U.S. Military Options

The United States first assessed in 2014 that Russia was in violation of its obligations under the INF Treaty. It determined that Russia had developed an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile, now known as the 9M729. At the time, the Pentagon initiated a study to evaluate whether the United States needed new military capabilities to offset any advantage Russia might acquire by deploying a ground-launched cruise missile of INF range (between 500 and 5,500 kilometers). While the results of the study were not made public, Brian McKeon, then the Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, noted that the United States could respond by deploying new defenses against cruise missiles, developing and possibly deploying new intermediate-range missiles, and deploying other military capabilities to counter the new Russian capabilities.

While generally supportive of diplomatic efforts to bring Russia back into compliance with INF, Congress also supported the development of a military response. The FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 113-291, §1651) and FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-92, §1243) called on the Pentagon to study and plan for the development of possible military options. The FY2018 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-91, §1243) authorized funding for research into defenses, counterforce capabilities, and countervailing capabilities

and mandated that DOD begin a program of record to develop a new U.S. ground-launched cruise missile. Some Members, have, however, criticized the decision to withdraw from the treaty and proposed legislation that would limit the production and deployment of new systems.

Some analysts argue that the United States does not have to deploy new land-based missiles to respond to Russia's new missile or to address challenges from China; it could deploy more sea-based or air-delivered weapons that are not limited by the INF Treaty.

In a briefing on February 1, 2019, a senior U.S. government official noted that the United States does not plan to deploy any INF-range systems immediately, as it had not developed such systems while the treaty was in force. The official also noted that the United States was considering only conventional options and did not, at this time, plan to develop new nuclear-armed INF-range missiles.

The United States could pursue a number of INF-range programs and technologies that could add potentially valuable capabilities. For example, the Army is developing a new Precision Strike Missile with a range of 499 kilometers (consistent with the INF Treaty), but could extend it with little difficulty. The United States could also adapt existing sea-based Tomahawk cruise missiles for land-based delivery by developing new or adapting existing land-based launchers, such as the MK-41 launchers that are part of the U.S. missile defense system in Romania. (Russia has expressed concerns about these launchers precisely because it fears they could be adapted to launch Tomahawk cruise missiles.) It could also acquire a new intermediate-range ballistic missile and deploy it with either existing reentry vehicle technology (essentially replacing the Pershing II missiles destroyed under INF), or design a new trajectory-shaping reentry vehicle that could maneuver and glide to evade an adversary's missile defenses.

In March 2019, the Pentagon announced that it would test a new ground-launched cruise missile in August 2019, just after the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty was complete. It also indicated that it would test a new intermediate-range ballistic missile in November 2019. The cruise missile, which would essentially be a Tomahawk missile in a container placed on a mobile launcher, might be deployed 18 months later. The ballistic missiles, which would be similar to the Pershing II missile deployed in the 1980s, would take at least five years to reach deployment.

Issues in Asia

Several analysts have argued that the INF Treaty places the United States at a disadvantage when addressing challenges from China because China has deployed thousands of land-

based intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles that threaten U.S. forces and allies in Asia. Some, including President Trump, have identified this imbalance as a part of the rationale for the U.S. to withdraw from the treaty.

Others, however, have questioned whether the United States needs to deploy land-based missiles to address its concerns with China. They note that the United States should not simply mirror Chinese capabilities, as U.S. missiles would not be intended to offset or attack Chinese missiles. In addition, the United States has limited access to land areas in Asia that are within intermediate-range distances from China. It does enjoy far greater access to open ocean areas, which may argue for greater deployments at sea than on land. Those who support land-based deployments respond by noting that sea-based and air-delivered capabilities would be both more expensive and more vulnerable than mobile land-based missiles and that U.S. assets at sea are already burdened with expanding missions and responsibilities.

Allied Views

In the joint statement released after their December 4 meeting, NATO foreign ministers stated that they “strongly support the finding ... that Russia is in material breach of its obligations under the INF Treaty.” In a statement released on February 1, 2019, the North Atlantic Council noted that Russia had “taken no demonstrable steps toward returning to full and verifiable compliance” and that “Russia will bear sole responsibility for the end of the Treaty.” At the same time, the statement noted that the “allies are firmly committed to the preservation of effective international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation” and “will continue to uphold, support, and further strengthen arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, as a key element of Euro-Atlantic security.”

Over the past few years, NATO, as a whole, has echoed U.S. concerns about Russia’s new missile, but some Members have expressed doubt about whether the United States had enough evidence to conclude that the missile violated the INF Treaty. This lingering uncertainty was evident as recently as October 2018, when, after a meeting of NATO defense ministers, NATO’s Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, noted that Russia had failed to provide “any credible answers on this new missile.” He did not, though, affirm the U.S. conclusion with the certainty contained in the December 4 statement, stating, instead, that the “allies agree that the *most plausible* assessment would be that Russia is in violation of the Treaty.”

According to press reports, U.S. allies in Europe and Asia were surprised by the President’s October 20 announcement; several suggested that the United States exercise caution before withdrawing from the treaty. For example, Germany’s Foreign Minister Heiko Maas noted that the INF Treaty had been an “important pillar of our European security architecture” for over 30 years and said that “the United States should consider the consequences, both for Europe and for future disarmament efforts, of pulling out of an international treaty aimed at eliminating a class of nuclear weapons.” Japanese officials also expressed concern, calling the withdrawal “undesirable” and noting that it could accelerate an arms race with Russia and China, and hinder progress toward North Korea’s denuclearization.

Press reports indicate that the United States had planned to submit the official notice of withdrawal on December 4, after the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting. It delayed this for 60 days after the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and other European leaders argued that the United States should allow time for additional consultations with Russia, in an effort to convince it to return to compliance.

The Russian Response

Russia has consistently denied that it has violated the INF Treaty and initially denied that the missile in question even existed. After the United States provided further details and the designation for the missile, it denied that the missile had been tested to INF range. It has also accused the United States of violating the treaty by using intermediate-range missiles as targets during tests of U.S. missile defense systems, employing armed drones, and by deploying missile defense interceptors on land in the Navy’s MK-41 missile launchers. (The United States has denied these accusations.) Russian officials, including President Putin, have asserted that if the United States withdraws from the treaty and deploys new missiles in Europe, Russia could both respond in kind and, using existing capabilities, target U.S. allies hosting new U.S. missiles in any subsequent military exchange.

U.S. and Russian officials met on January 15, 2019, in a last attempt to resolve the dispute. According to press reports, Russian diplomats said that Russia would display the 9M729 missile and demonstrate that it could not fly to INF range, while the United States, in exchange, could demonstrate that the MK-41 launchers in Romania could not be converted to launch INF-range cruise missiles. The United States rejected this proposal. Andrea Thompson, the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, noted that an inspection of the missile would not allow the United States to “confirm the distance that missile can travel,” and that the “verifiable destruction of the non-compliant system” was the only way for Russia “to return to compliance in a manner that we can confirm.” Moreover, although the United States has provided Russia with technical details to demonstrate that the MK-41 launchers in Romania cannot launch offensive cruise missiles, it would be unwilling to link Russia’s objections to U.S. missile defense programs with the INF dispute by including them in an inspection regime.

After receiving the U.S. notice of withdrawal, Russia’s President Putin announced that Russia would also suspend its participation in the INF Treaty. He also indicated that Russia would develop INF-range missiles—including a land-based version of the sea-based Kalibr cruise missile and hypersonic intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles—to counter new U.S. systems. However, he indicated that Russia would only deploy intermediate-range systems in Europe or Asia after the United States deployed these types of weapons in these regions. It is not clear that this pledge applies to the 9M729 cruise missile, as Russia continues to deny that this missile can fly to INF range.

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