



BULLETIN

No. 97 (829), 30 October 2015 © PISM

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Scenarios for Russia's Withdrawal from the INF Treaty

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Russia can put on hold its formal withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty until the United States does it first or it could use another available opportunity, such as the coming announcement of the operational readiness of the U.S. missile defence facility in Romania. No matter when Moscow decides to do so, it will blame Russia's withdrawal on the U.S. and its NATO allies. To discourage Russia from operational deployment of the missiles, forbidden now under the treaty, the Alliance should commence consultations on specific response options. It should also intensify its strategic communication to make it clear that the demise of the INF treaty would be the sole result of Russia's actions.

The United States has determined that Russia has violated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which eliminated U.S. and Soviet ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500–5,500 km and has been one of the pillars of European military predictability and stability. The U.S. maintains that Russia has tested a new ground-launched cruise missile with a prohibited range, which would broaden Russia's conventional and nuclear strike options in Europe and Asia.¹ The missile, banned by the INF, is dubbed by the Pentagon as the "SSC-X-8." U.S. officials did not specify it to a concrete missile type but deny that it is an R-500/9M728. There is speculation that it could be a possible successor missile, the 9M729, or a ground-launched version of the normally sea-launched Kalibr-NK (SSN-30-A).

U.S. diplomatic efforts to persuade Russia to return to full and verifiable compliance under the treaty have not brought the desired effects. A breakthrough came neither from bilateral talks conducted since 2013 nor by the public disclosure of the U.S. findings in State Department reports from July 2014 and June 2015. Russia consistently denies the U.S. charges but then goes further and dubiously accuses the U.S. of breaching the treaty.

To increase pressure for compliance, since the beginning of 2015 the U.S. has been warning that if Russia operationally deploys the prohibited missiles it would resort to a military or economic response. The U.S. military options are meant to convince Russia that violating the treaty would not result in a significant military advantage. The options include three categories of responses: the first is active defence against intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missiles; a second is counterforce capabilities to prevent missiles from being launched; or the third, countervailing strike capabilities to hit back after attacks. Concrete options were prepared in late 2014 and have not been made public. Nothing indicates that they have been presented to NATO, even though the Allies most likely would play a crucial role in implementing some of them.

Despite the U.S. efforts, Russia has continued development of the banned missile, flight-testing it in early September, according to press reports. It is likely that Russia will covertly deploy the SSC-X-8. Whether and when it would decide to formally abandon the treaty is an open question. There are three probable scenarios in which it can take such a step.

A U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty. Russia can wait until the U.S. abandons the INF treaty first. Until it does, Russia is able to unilaterally benefit from its violation of the treaty. If the U.S. does withdraw first, Russia can blame Washington for abrogating the treaty.

Moscow can assume that the United States is not ready to develop, build and deploy ground-launched medium-range missiles. At this point, it is unlikely that NATO will agree on deployment of such systems in Europe. Russia can also presume

¹ J. Durkalec, "Russia's Violation of the INF Treaty: Consequences for NATO," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 107 (702), 13 August 2014, www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-107-702.

that its status as a formal party to the treaty would impede U.S. decisions about INF treaty-compliant responses, such as sea- or air-launched cruise missiles. It is likely that some NATO allies will claim that a hard stance would only give Russia pretext for a further missile build-up.

A strategy based on such presumptions is consistent with Russia's approach of denying that the suspected missile even exists. Even though the U.S. claims that it has provided data that should prompt Russia to identify the illegal missile, Moscow claims that it is insufficient. It has asked for further details, with the likely aim to see how the U.S. collected the intelligence.

Reaction to Further Implementation of U.S. Missile Defence Plans. If Russia wants to blame the U.S. for ending the INF treaty, it does not have to wait for a U.S. withdrawal. It can exploit the further implementation of the U.S. European Phased Adaptive Approach to Missile Defense (EPAA)—the U.S. contribution to NATO's Ballistic Missile Defence System. To justify its formal withdrawal, Russia can point to the operational readiness of the U.S. missile defence facility in Romania, which is planned to be announced by the end of this year, or to the ground-breaking ceremony at a similar facility in Redzikowo, Poland in 2016. Russia has made all of the political preparations needed for such a step. It consistently highlights that the deployment of MK-41 launchers in Deveselu, Romania, would be "a gross violation of the INF treaty," even though the U.S. land-based missile defence facilities are configured to launch only SM-3 missile defence interceptors, which does not violate the treaty, not Tomahawk cruise missiles. Moscow also underlines that with a nuclear deal with Iran, the further implementation of EPAA is unjustified, even if Iran continues to develop its missile arsenal separate from its nuclear programme, something confirmed by Iran's latest medium-range missile test of 10 October 2015.

Juxtaposing the abandonment of the INF treaty with the EPAA's progress would be politically beneficial for Russia. It can be used to strengthen a long-held argument that missile defence destabilizes the European security environment and that Russia is only reacting to aggressive actions. INF treaty withdrawal also can be presented as a delayed consequence of the U.S. exit from the ABM treaty in 2001. At the same time, Russia can make its return to the INF treaty contingent upon U.S. agreement on legally binding constraints of EPAA, hoping that some NATO allies would help it persuade the U.S. to do so.

Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank. Russia does not necessarily have to link withdrawal from the INF treaty to EPAA as Moscow still has some as yet unused response options to the U.S. missile defence plans, including permanent deployment of Iskander-M missiles to Kaliningrad Oblast or deployment of Tu-22 M3 bombers to Crimea. INF treaty withdrawal also could be postponed and justified by other pretexts. Russia could decide to abandon the treaty in reaction to NATO steps to strengthen its deterrence and defence posture, including decisions about NATO's military adaptation and greater presence in Central and Eastern Europe, a move which should be adopted at the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016. In a long-term perspective, the withdrawal could be announced after 2020 when the U.S. plans to start replacing U.S. nuclear gravity bombs based in Europe with an up-to-date version, the B-61-12. In both case, Russia would describe its actions as responses to hostile NATO activities.

Conclusions. Russia's formal withdrawal from the INF treaty would have mainly political significance. To preserve the viability of the treaty, it is crucial to dissuade Russia from operational deployment of the prohibited missiles to units trained to use them. It is difficult to determine which of the above scenarios would be used by Russia to formally exit the INF treaty. What is more important, however, is that Russia can do so at any point it finds to be the most advantageous and especially if it also allows it to blame its misconduct on the U.S. and other NATO members.

To discourage Russia from deployment of the INF-banned missiles, the U.S. response options should become a subject of consultation within NATO, and that fact should then be publicized. If not, Russia will calculate that the U.S. warnings are empty—a lack of Allied consultations reflects an unwillingness to risk the political, financial and military costs of a response to an INF treaty breach. Even if the options become a source of controversy among NATO, the signal that the Alliance is closely considering them can have a dissuasive effect alone, as Russia cannot be sure of the final result of the process. Using an historical analogy, when in 1976 the United States for the first time briefed the NATO Allies about Soviet deployments of SS-20 ballistic missiles, the U.S. goal was to persuade its allies about the need for strengthening their conventional capabilities. No one expected that in 1979 NATO would decide to deploy U.S. missiles to Europe or that the Allies would implement the decision. Even though the deployment of U.S. nuclear missiles in Europe is redundant and unrealistic, a conventional response remains open.

Making a list of military response options is, however, not enough. It is crucial for NATO to undermine Russia's efforts to create the narrative that the INF treaty's demise is the West's fault. The U.S. and its NATO allies should not only react every time to Russia's claims by setting the record straight. It is indispensable that in different international forums, such as the First Committee of the UN General Assembly, they present a coherent and clear position about the significance of the INF treaty and the negative implications for European stability caused by Russia's development of prohibited missiles capable of carrying not only conventional but also nuclear warheads. What is especially visible is the weak pressure on Russia from European states directly affected by Russia's activities. The insufficiency of NATO strategic communication only makes it easier for Russia to take the decision to deploy the prohibited missiles.

In the context of the planned commencement of construction of the U.S. missile defence facility in Redzikowo, and the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, Poland should advocate improvements in these areas in its bilateral discussions with the U.S. and at NATO. Poland should also point out the implications for NATO's security caused by Russia's growing air- and sea-launched missile capabilities. Among them, particularly the Kalibr-NK-type missiles used in Syria, which have a range greater than 1,500km, can be launched from naval vessels, including submarines, and which pose a comparable challenge to NATO as any missiles breaching the INF treaty.