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The return of nuclear thinking

The US's planned withdrawal from the INF Treaty threatens to trigger a new nuclear arms race in Europe

Read this article in German.

When the NATO foreign ministers convened for their autumn meeting on 4 December 2018, the future of disarmament and arms control was at stake. The US presented intelligence-based reports alleging that Russia has violated the INF Treaty, and pushed successfully for NATO to formally give its backing to these accusations.

President Trump announced on 20 October that he would be withdrawing from the treaty, which prohibits Washington and Moscow from possessing or deploying land-based intermediate-range missiles with a range between 500 and 5,500 kilometres. The INF Treaty, adopted in 1987, is rightly regarded as a key landmark in the history of European cooperative security, because it was the first time that an entire category of dangerous missile systems was completely eliminated.

There's a danger of a complete collapse of the international arms control architecture, with incalculable consequences for global security. Earlier this year, the US withdrew from the Iran treaty and it's entirely possible that the even more important New START treaty, which restricts the number of strategic nuclear arms, might not be extended in 2021. If New START is indeed not extended, it will be the first time since 1972 that there have been no legally binding, monitorable restrictions on the American and Russian nuclear arsenals. We could be on the brink of a new nuclear arms race.

Entirely new challenges for arms control policy are also posed by the rapid technological development of new and as yet unregulated weapon systems and the blurring of the boundaries between conventional and nuclear threats.

The new nuclear era

To put it in a nutshell: nuclear thinking is back. It wasn't long ago that the Obama administration retired the US's nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles and briefly considered dropping the 'First Strike' doctrine. But under Trump, the capacity and willingness to wage nuclear warfare are once again part of US nuclear policy, which is increasingly focused on smaller, more precise nuclear weapons.

An incredible USD 1.7 trillion have been allocated to upgrading the American nuclear arsenal over the next 30 years. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has repeatedly made threats to use Russia's nuclear arms, has also begun upgrading his country's nuclear arsenal. If similar deterrence mindsets also take hold in other countries, it could usher in a future of nuclear panics and spiralling threats that would make the Cold War look trifling by comparison.

Europe must resolutely oppose the threat of a new nuclear arms race and insist that accusations from both sides be investigated in a spirit of transparency and cooperation.

An increasing number of countries are developing intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles, many of which could be armed with nuclear warheads. That's why, in the past, the US and Russia have often mooted the idea of universalising the INF Treaty. Both countries feel threatened by the build-up of arms in Asia (above all by China but also by Iran, India and Pakistan). Back in 2008, they made an unsuccessful attempt at the UN to bring more countries into the treaty, most crucially China. Trump has renewed the push to get China to enter into a trilateral or multilateral treaty, but it's not clear what the Americans and Russians could offer China in return for doing so.

To meet the requirements of a multilateral INF Treaty, as proposed by Trump, China would need to destroy 80 per cent of its arsenal. Needless to say, it has no interest in such a radical curtailment of its deterrent capability, and believes the primary responsibility for disarmament lies with the two big nuclear powers. This goes some way to explaining why both the US and Russia share the long-term goal of freeing themselves from the shackles of the INF Treaty.

Fighting against a new arms race

The US administration has not yet formally suspended or withdrawn from the treaty. The European NATO states should take a common

position and make clear to the US administration that they have a key interest in maintaining the INF Treaty and that they reject the redeployment of American nuclear weapons in Europe. Meanwhile, NATO as a whole should call on Russia to disclose the sites of the systems that are alleged to have breached the treaty and allow inspectors to visit them.

It's now abundantly clear that Russia regarded former president George W. Bush's unilateral deployment of US anti-missile defence systems in Eastern Europe and the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, which restricted the use of such systems, as a serious breach of trust. This has strained relations to this day. Europe must resolutely oppose the threat of a new nuclear arms race and insist that accusations from both sides be investigated in a spirit of transparency and cooperation.

Terminating the INF Treaty would not only diminish the existing arms control framework, but would bring about a revival of the belief that nuclear war is both possible and winnable.

Otherwise, there's a danger of reigniting the kinds of debates about the build-up and deployment of arms that raged at the height of the Cold War. If, for example, Poland and the Baltic states agree bilateral treaties allowing American intermediate-range missiles to be stationed in their territory, it will threaten Europe's security. It could even trigger a new rearmament debate and leave Europe and NATO irreconcilably divided over security policy. That would play right into the hands of the Russians and Americans – or, to be more precise, of Putin and Trump. And that's precisely what we Europeans must prevent!

Terminating the INF Treaty would not only diminish the existing arms control framework, but would bring about a revival of the belief that nuclear war is both possible and winnable. Both the Russian and US governments have made nuclear weapons into weapons of war again.

This fact casts the recent decision to replace Germany's Tornado aircraft, which is capable of carrying the US nuclear warheads stationed in Germany, in an entirely new light. It's a decision that demands very careful deliberation. We cannot give President Trump new means to pursue his dangerous policy or allow new intermediate-range missiles to be stationed on German soil. All efforts must be channelled into establishing new arms control and disarmament treaties that cover anti-missile defences.

Germany is therefore right to have made it a key priority of its two-year

term as a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council to put the crisis of nuclear disarmament and arms control back on the agenda. Because Germany and Europe must never again become the arena for dangerous nuclear posturing. The Social Democrats (SPD) will absolutely not allow any new American intermediate-range missiles to be stationed in Germany. Instead, we must do all we can to prevent a revival of nuclear thinking and the return of a nuclear shadow over Europe.



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