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EUROPE AND THE INF CRISIS

STRENGTH AND DIALOGUE

Ulrich Kühn

EUROPE is facing a new debate about nuclear weapons. The crisis surrounding the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty forces NATO allies to reconsider military and arms control responses. Only a healthy mix of strength and dialogue will guarantee allied unity.

The 1987 Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union on the Elimination of their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles—more commonly referred to as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty—can easily be considered a landmark arms control and disarmament treaty.

It was the first bilateral agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States to effectively eliminate a whole class of missiles and missile launchers. It lifted the most imminent nuclear threat to Western Europe, served as a significant

turning point in U.S.-Soviet relations, and introduced the then most intrusive verification measures to date. Its previous history was one of the end of the first period of détente, of NATO's dual-track decision to counter the Soviet SS-20 threat, and of a negotiation record that finally achieved what almost no one would have expected when negotiators first sat down in Geneva.

Thirty-one years after INF entered into force in 1988, the Treaty is now all but dead. In 2014, the United States publicly accused Moscow of violating the Treaty by having flight-tested a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) in the ranges banned by INF (500–5,500 km). Subsequently, U.S. officials expressed concerns that Russia might have started producing more missiles than needed to sustain a flight-test program. Russia continues to reject the accusations and has tabled a number of counter-allegations against the United States.

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Photo: The White House Flickr Account

Presidents Andrzej Duda and Donald Trump discuss the prospect of a permanent American base in Poland

The diplomatic to and for of the last four years has neither helped resolve the issue nor shed light on the question of why Russia chose to violate the Treaty. Finally, on February 1st, 2019, American President Donald Trump declared that America would exit the INF Treaty six months later. On August 2nd, 2019, INF will be history. The ramifications will be felt throughout Europe.

THE SPECTER OF A NEW MISSILE ARMS RACE

Even if the Trump Administration says otherwise, a reintroduction of American ground-launched INF-range missiles becomes very likely with the

end of the INF Treaty. The Pentagon has been researching a new conventional GLCM and a modern medium-range ballistic missile since 2018. Latest reports from Washington indicate that the GLCM could be ready for deployment in early 2021.

However, before the new missile could enter production, the U.S. Congress would have to approve additional funding. While this is not a foregone conclusion, it is also far from being impossible. If Trump were still to be President then, the White House could argue that America must not limit itself unnecessarily while

Russia is free to deploy more and more intermediate missiles.

Already in that debate, the question of where to deploy a new American cruise missile, and later perhaps an intermediate-range ballistic missile, would come up. Any such missile would have to be stationed on land—ergo on the territory of American allies. As a result, the specter of a new missile arms race on the European continent would reemerge. Akin to the 1980s, this could again cause massive protests.

To prevent such an unfortunate and dangerous outcome, Europeans must act in unity. As a measure of immediate necessity, they should increase the pressure on Moscow. While European distaste for Donald Trump and his hawkish team is understandable, the perpetrator in the new INF missile crisis is not America, but Russia. The Russian INF-busting missile—NATO designation SSC-8—is directly targeting Europe. Therefore, the overarching and long-term goal for Europeans must be for Moscow to completely and verifiably eliminate the SSC-8 and its mobile launcher.

If that proves impossible, Europeans should at least aim to limit Russia's

missile buildup. Any such outcome is difficult to imagine without pressure, because the SSC-8 cruise missile—with an assumed range of over 2,000 kilometers—offers the Russian military a formidable weapon with which to threaten

Europe. It is also an excellent political tool to divide NATO.

EUROPE NEEDS TO ACT

So, what could Europeans do? First of all, there are still diplomatic means available. Germany and Belgium, for instance—two poten-

tial deployment countries for America's future GLCM—have assumed non-permanent seats at the United Nation's Security Council as of this year. They should use this role to put INF, and arms control in general, prominently on the agenda.

Second, European governments should not limit themselves to public appeals. Instead, political pressure on Moscow could be extended to the economic realm. This could include new economic and financial sanctions, with the countries with particularly high stakes in the economic game with Russia having to exert leadership. Germany, Russia's second-largest trading partner, could up the ante by bringing into question the completion

of the controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, connecting Russia and Germany through the Baltic Sea.

Third, Europeans must make maximum use of national technical means—that is, their intelligence capabilities. On the one hand, Europeans will want to stay ahead of the learning curve when it comes to likely further deployments of Russian SSC-8s. On the other hand, European capitals need credible intelligence for the soon-to-be expected debate regarding military countermeasures against Russia. This debate will be too important for the old continent to rely solely on American intelligence.

Fourth, since a further Russian missile buildup is quite likely, European NATO allies must also consider military countermeasures. A number of options are available.

AVAILABLE OPTIONS

One option would be additional American missile defense installations to defend against cruise missiles. So-called "point defenses" could be deployed around NATO reinforcement nodes that are critical in a potential conflict with Russia along NATO's eastern flank.

Point defense, however, has a number of disadvantages. Systems such as the American "Patriot" system are very expensive, only able to cover a rather small geographical area, and not very successful when it comes to defending against low-flying, maneuverable cruise missiles.

Since U.S. President Donald Trump would very likely insist on allied burden sharing, European taxpayers would ultimately have to pay the bill for additional missile defense. Further on, Moscow could respond to an increase in missile defense by deploying even more Russian INF missiles.

A second option—one that would put the onus on offense—would be to rotate American long-range bombers to Western Europe at a higher rate than is already done. Equipped with conventional standoff weapons, such as the JASSM-ER, bombers could signal an increased readiness to hold targets deep inside Russia at risk.

But this precise signaling effect could also be misinterpreted. In an acute military crisis, the transfer of bombers to Europe could be misunderstood in Moscow as preparation for preventive first strike—also because American B-52 and B-2 bombers can accommodate nuclear-tipped missiles.

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Another option would be to ask American defense planners to increase the U.S. naval footprint in European waters, such as the Baltic and Black seas, through a larger presence of American surface and submarine vessels equipped with conventional cruise missiles.

Again, this option has a number of downside risks. America's new nuclear strategy foresees the development of a nuclear-tipped, sea-based cruise missile, as well as a new low yield warhead for the Trident ballistic missile. Since American ships and submarines are also equipped with conventional standoff weapons, a discrimination problem could well occur in a crisis. How should Moscow know whether an incoming missile launched from an American vessel is nuclear or conventional?

Perhaps the most realistic option would be some kind of mix of the military measures so far presented. And, indeed, an options paper is currently being discussed at NATO Headquarters in Brussels and allies are expected to agree on some kind of military response, ideally before the end of the year.

The greater problem is that none of the options are risk-free. Neither do they tick all the boxes of crisis and arms race stability, nor those of political feasibility. Nevertheless, from today's perspective, all the options discussed

so far are preferable by far to a renewed land deployment of American medium-range missiles. And for good reason.

ARMS CONTROL OPTIONS

Europeans should make clear that they will not automatically endorse a new American call for

forward-deployed American INF-range missiles on European soil. This is for four reasons.

First, the land deployment of new INF-range missiles would create enormous domestic political opposition in a number of allied countries. The expected controversies could paralyze NATO for years to come. Deployment decisions should not be driven by American domestic politics while ignoring European political realities.

Second, America's top military brass has thus far not seen a need for a new GLCM. When asked what military response Russia's breach of the INF Treaty might trigger, General Paul Selva

unequivocally excluded new land-based missiles as "not necessary." European allies should not hesitate to remind Washington that—as the potential target of Russian missiles—Europeans have the greatest interest in an effective military response.

Third, INF-range missiles, due to the nature of their short flight times, massively decrease warning times. In a crisis, political leaders might only have less than three minutes to respond to what they might perceive as being an attack with INF-range missiles. History books are full of close calls, where American or Soviet systems created false warnings of a missile attack that never happened. Going back to those dangerous days cannot be in Europe's interests.

Fourth, Europeans might embark on a slippery slope if they accept uncritically the arguments brought forward by Trump's advisers that America's planned INF-range GLCM is "only conventional." In fact, a conventional cruise missile can easily be turned into a nuclear-tipped cruise missile. If Europeans agree to the deployment of a conventional GLCM, they should make clear that any deployment of nuclear GLCMs would require a separate NATO consensus.

PIONEERING ROLE?

In order to prevent arms race and crisis instability, Europeans should play a pioneering role in the development of a new arms control framework for INF systems. Here, too, different options are conceivable.

For instance, NATO could make a no-first-deployment pledge in exchange for Russian geographical restraint. In essence, NATO would pledge not to deploy new land-based

INF missiles in Europe first. Russia would reciprocate by relocating its SSC-8 missiles east of the Ural Mountains. Verifying Russian withdrawal could be achieved using national technical means, which were already sufficient to detect the Russian violation in the first place.

Another, more complex option, would be the separation of nuclear warheads and launch vehicles on both sides. That would mean storing nuclear warheads verifiably several hours away from the respective launch systems. In that way, both sides would increase crisis stability by reducing the potential for misunderstandings triggering an overreaction. Such an approach could apply to mobile land-based launchers and ballistic missiles,

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as well as to NATO's forward-deployed fighter jets. A technical study by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research only recently came to the conclusion that verifying the absence of nuclear warheads from their non-strategic delivery vehicles could be modeled along the lines of the agreement on the reduction of strategic arms (New START).

A third, but very unlikely option would be a new INF agreement involving China, as Moscow proposed more than ten years ago. Trump security adviser John Bolton has heavily stressed China's INF-range arsenal as a reason to get rid of INF. But Bolton knows for certain that China could only be convinced of an arms control framework for INF-range missiles if Washington and Moscow were to simultaneously offer to include their strategic (with ranges over 5,500 km) and tactical nuclear arms (with ranges under 500 km), an area where both countries have a clear advantage over China. Since this seems highly unlikely, Bolton's continued references to include China in arms control talks are probably nothing more than a sleight of hand to prevent a serious arms control process altogether.

STAYING UNIFIED

Ultimately, Europeans need to carefully thread the needle. A coherent NATO response to the new Russian threat will require the right combination of strength, in the form

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of a measured military response to Russia, and dialogue on arms control. A major split in NATO over balancing these two tools cannot be ruled out. This is mainly due to divergent European perceptions of the gravity of the threat Russia poses.

In that regard, as on many other issues, Europe is far from being unified. Allies like Poland or the Baltic states prefer a strong military response to an arms control offer to Moscow. Some of those states might also be open to the possibility of hosting new INF-range missiles, perhaps even on a bilateral basis. Others, such as Germany, France, the Netherlands or Italy, are much less alarmist when it comes to Russia, and remain highly skeptical of the wisdom of a new missile tit-for-tat.

The Kremlin will play on these divergent attitudes in the hope of deepening the rifts in the alliance. Proponents of arms control must therefore be careful in advancing their arguments.

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If a European government speaks only about "dialogue" and "arms control," for example, and against new deployments on land, the possibility of disagreement with Warsaw, London, or Washington increases. At the same time, engaging in a new deployment debate could get so toxic that it may overstretch NATO cohesion—and all that against the background of available military and arms control alternatives. Europe may well have to tolerate this difficult trade-off.

In order not to be left to the whims of leaders in Moscow and Washington, Europeans should seek to find as many allies as possible for a new "zero solution"—a response to Russia's INF violation that gets by with "zero" new intermediate-range missiles. There are too many military and political arguments against reintroducing new American ground-launched intermediate-range missiles to Europe. In order to achieve that goal, Europeans must pursue a healthy mix of NATO consensus, clear enunciation to Washington of European concerns, toughness toward Russia, and readiness for serious dialogue with the Kremlin. ●