



The End of the INF-Treaty: Context and Consequences

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On 2 August both the US and the Russian Federation will no longer be restrained by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (1987). Early this century it gradually became clear that Russia wanted to step out of the Treaty, by which it felt itself to be solely restrained. European nations should now take up a greater share of the burden of missile defence, which should get a broader mission than it has today. The debate on EU strategic autonomy can be an instrument in this endeavour. Because of the worsening security environment NATO's non-strategic nuclear capability becomes even more important. European NATO allies and EU member states may very soon be confronted with difficult and fundamental choices for a future without the INF Treaty, which need to be communicated and explained to their national population.

In 1979 the USSR deployed its first mobile SS-20 on the European continent. In 1985 leading experts were expecting that by 1995 Russia would deploy up to 3000 nuclear-capable air-, sea- and ground-launched cruise missiles, of which especially the last category caused serious concerns in Europe. It was the German

chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD) who insisted in 1977 in a speech in London that a Western response to these Russian SS-20 deployments should be “explored”; for a number of world leaders it was increasingly clear that the arms race should be reversed. In 1979 NATO's foreign and defence ministers took the “double track decision”: the removal of about 1000 nuclear warheads from Europe and, should negotiations with the USSR fail, the deployment in Europe by NATO of “US ground-launched systems comprising 108 Pershing II launchers and 464 ground launched cruise missiles”. NATO recognised that “arms control in constraining the Soviet build-up can enhance Alliance security, modify the scale of NATO's theatre nuclear forces requirements, and promote stability and detente in Europe in consonance with NATO's basic policy of deterrence, defence and detente as enunciated in the Harmel Report”. As from December 1983 Pershing II launchers were to be deployed in West-Germany and the cruise missiles in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. For Belgium the deployment of 48 cruise missiles proved to be an extremely difficult decision to take as political parties and even a number of governments were in complete disagreement. Massive protests with perhaps 400,000 demonstrators added to the internal pressure on the government. In the end Belgium (1985) almost got isolated within the NATO alliance (and even in Moscow it did not find a listening ear).

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE INF TREATY

On 8 December 1987 in Washington president Reagan and Soviet general secretary Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty, which banned the possession, the production or flight-testing of all (or: only of) land-based short/medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and missile launchers with ranges between 500 and 5500 km. The prohibition applied to both nuclear and conventional warheads of ground-launched missiles of the Soviet Union and the US. On-site verification inspections until the end of 2001 ensured that both parties were respecting the Treaty; from that moment on compliance was verified by other means (a.o. satellite). The Treaty missed permanent verification procedures, which has led to suspicion and denials from 2002 onwards, as verification mechanisms were no longer in place.

On the basis of the INF Treaty the US and the USSR by 11 May 1991 had eliminated 2.692 missiles covered under the Treaty. The Treaty is a bilateral agreement between the Soviet Union and the US. With the implosion of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact four post-soviet states (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation and Ukraine) became active participants in the Treaty process, but basically the Treaty remains a bilateral agreement, with no European nation participating or affected. The Treaty indeed did not put any constraints on French and British nuclear forces. The Treaty has an unlimited duration, but each party has the right (article XV) to withdraw from the Treaty with six months' notice, "if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests". The far-reaching Treaty was a crucial contribution in reducing tensions between the USSR and the US at the end of the Cold War. It

is noteworthy that neither European nations were part of the agreement, nor NATO allies. The INF Treaty also had strategic consequences: it was the first treaty to eliminate a whole category of missiles and it has positively influenced later treaties on arms control and disarmament (e.g. START). Europe has benefited from the landmark agreement as an imminent threat of nuclear war was removed from the European continent and the Treaty contributed to a global arms control architecture and "mentality". The Treaty "only" eliminated land-based missile systems with a range of 500 to 5500 km. The current Russian leadership views this as a mistake as it is blocked by the Treaty from developing and fielding such missiles, while in the Pacific realm Moscow is confronted with China that is investing in such systems.

THE WORSENING EUROPEAN AND GLOBAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

In the last decade Europe has increasingly been confronted with a Russian behaviour that is challenging the rules-based European security order that was put in place after World War II, and international law. Moscow is covertly and overtly supporting populist and extremist movements all over Europe and is trying to undermine the internal stability of European nations, using the cyber domain, social media and other military and civil instruments of power in what can genuinely be called a form of constant hybrid warfare. Russia has actively intervened in the domestic politics of North-Macedonia, Moldova and Georgia to avoid that these countries would choose for Euro-Atlantic integration. The use of military force for the Russian occupation of two break-away regions in Georgia (2008), for the illegal annexation of Crimea and the lasting occupation of Donbass (2014) do not need more explanation. The Minsk agreements remain without full implementation.

Although its economy is suffering from Western sanctions and low oil prices, Russia is using its formidable military industrial complex to invest in new and modern capabilities, which are reinforcing Russian units in the Black and Baltic Sea regions. Frequent massive and short notice military exercises close to the borders of NATO allies are a cause of great concern for those countries that consider these as a direct military threat to their security. In the scenarios for these exercises Russia is seamlessly including nuclear weapons, which really lowers the nuclear threshold considerably. Noteworthy is the deployment of nuclear capable missiles (9K720 Iskander) to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, bordering Lithuania and Poland, two EU member states and NATO allies; this deployment has upset Western nations. The use of the toxic chemical nerve agent novichok against Sergei Skripal in Salisbury (2018) has been condemned by all EU member states and NATO allies. Many threads lead to Russian capabilities in the MH17 dossier (2014). The Russian intervention in support of Syria's president Assad was forceful and according to Western standards not proportionate or discriminatory.

According to the Kremlin there is a "serious crisis in the relations between Russia and the Western States" because "systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region (...) are manifested in the geopolitical expansion pursued by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) along with their refusal to begin implementation of political statements regarding the creation of a common European security and cooperation framework". The work of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) for years now has been practically paralysed by the worsening of the European security situation, and particularly after the Russian occupation of parts of Georgian and Ukrainian territory. The temperature

in the Vienna headquarters of the OSCE reflects the security in the Euro-Atlantic area. Russia is using multiple political, military, diplomatic and economic tools to challenge the rules-based international system.

In the Pacific the military rise of China is a source of major concern not only for the US, but also for Russia. According to the 2018 Military Balance China is the only of the 3 global nuclear powers possessing intermediate range land-launched (mobile) missiles. On a couple of occasions Russian leadership has referred to this unbalance. One should not forget the challenges on Russia's southern flank.

It is in this general framework of a worsening European and global security environment that the INF Treaty is another factor of discordance.

EVENTS LEADING TO THE END OF THE INF TREATY

Why did the end of the INF Treaty come about? It is believed that Russia soon after the end of the verification inspections (2001) started developing a new missile system prohibited by the Treaty. Already in 2005 there were reports in Russian media that Russia could withdraw from the INF Treaty. In February 2007 president Putin indirectly expressed the first criticism and the intent to quit the INF agreement when he declared in his Munich speech that "everybody can understand that the anti-missile defence system is useless against Russia because we have certain weapons that easily overcome it. And we are proceeding in this direction". Did Putin mean that the Russian Federation was already working on a new type of cruise missile, that by definition do not follow a ballistic trajectory?

That same year his chief of the general staff, general Baluyevsky, declared that Russia was considering to unilaterally withdraw from the INF Treaty in response to NATO's (envisaged)

missile defence system and because “many countries were developing and improving medium-range missiles”. NATO’s missile defence system has been decided upon in 2010 by allied heads of state and government. By welcoming national contributions as “valuable to the NATO ballistic missile defence architecture”, they sought to expand NATO’s existing missile defence capability for the protection of deployed forces to also include the protection of NATO European territory and populations against ballistic missiles from outside the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO’s missile defence is lacking the capacity to defend against a massive ballistic missile attack like the Russian Federation is capable of launching. It is not a violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that the US and the USSR bilaterally had concluded in 1972 and that addressed counter-strategic ballistic missiles/launchers/radars; by the way the Treaty mentions the word “strategic” 105 times, but neglects to define it. Nowadays it is commonly agreed that strategic ballistic missiles have a range of above 5500km. The ABM Treaty dealt with national defence of the capital and some missile sites against a (intercontinental) ballistic missile attack and was generally considered as perpetuating the mutually assured destruction of the US and the USSR during the Cold War. It was president Bush who announced in 2001 that the US would withdraw from the Treaty as he felt constrained by it in the research and development of new ways (sea-launched missiles, laser,...) to counter the threat and as he wanted to ensure the protection of the US against a possible nuclear threat or blackmail by a rogue state.

According to Western reports it is believed that in 2008, in Kapustin Yar (near Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad), Russia started testing its new mobile and hard to detect ground-launched cruise missile with a range prohibited by the Treaty. Western experts called the missile “SSC 8”,

before they found out that the Russian military complex was using “9M927”. In June 2013 the hawkish chief of staff of the Russian presidential administration, Sergei Ivanov, declared that the INF Treaty had more benefits for the US as the US was not facing regional threats to its security. He added that “the Americans have no need for this class of weapon, they didn’t need it before and they don’t need it now. They could theoretically only attack Mexico and Canada, because their effective radius doesn’t extend to Europe”.

Since 2013 US has raised its concerns during discussions at various senior and technical levels. Washington was hoping that Russia would return to full and verifiable compliance with the Treaty. Russian officials were still in denial that their country was violating the Treaty, which led to a next step: in July 2014, in the midst of the Ukraine crisis, president Obama accused Moscow of violating the Treaty by testing a prohibited ground-launched cruise missile, a finding that he conveyed to his Russian counterpart in a letter. Russia simply dismissed the accusations as “ungrounded and no supporting evidence has been provided”, an attitude that has been persistently maintained throughout the process: first complete denial of the existence of the 9M729 system, followed by a limited admission that the system exists but does not violate the INF Treaty.

Starting in January 2014 the US regularly updated NATO allies on its findings and policy. Washington often took their comments and views on board; e.g. at the request of European allies the US conceded Russia more time to reflect and to return to compliance.

The Russian foreign policy concept, which president Putin has approved at the end of 2016, enumerates a number of nuclear agreements, but almost omits to mention the INF Treaty, if

there were not an indirect reference to it: “Russia advocates constructive cooperation with the US in arms control, with due consideration of the inextricable link between strategic offensive and defensive warfare, and the imperative to make nuclear disarmament a multilateral process. The Russian Federation believes that talks on the further reduction of strategic offensive arms are only possible when taking into account *all factors affecting global strategic stability*, without exception. Russia views the creation of the global missile-defence system by the US as a threat to its national security and reserves the right to take adequate retaliatory measures” (author’s emphasis). It is hard to imagine that ending a nuclear disarmament agreement is a retaliatory measure for a non-strategic ballistic missile defence. It was clear already then that Russia would give up the bilateral INF Treaty because it does not take into account all factors of global stability, i.e. including China.

The heads of state and government of the Alliance at their summits in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016) called “on Russia to preserve the viability of the INF Treaty through ensuring full and verifiable compliance”. But at their Brussels summit (2018) their call got louder and more worried as they concluded that “a pattern of behaviour and information over many years has led to widespread doubts about Russian compliance. Allies believe that, in the absence of any credible answer from Russia on this new missile, the most plausible assessment would be that Russia is in violation of the Treaty.”

During a marathon annual press conference in October 2017 president Putin accused the US of unilaterally withdrawing from the INF Treaty. He denied again that Russia was in violation and referred to NATO’s antimissile system as a breach of the Treaty. At that time he still promised that Russia would not withdraw from the Treaty. President Putin put the blame on

the US, while it was actually Russia that was laying the ground for the end of the INF Treaty.

THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM THE INF TREATY

In October 2018 president Trump announced that the US would withdraw from the Treaty as Russia was no longer in compliance since Moscow had developed and fielded the 9M729 missile system. This public presidential statement and the way the arguments were put were not the best example of communication: in the eyes of the general public it put the blame on Washington, and more particularly on the president. In a reaction the European Union expected the US and the Russian Federation “to remain engaged in constructive dialogue to preserve the INF Treaty and ensure its full and verifiable implementation which is crucial for Europe’s and global security. (...) The world doesn’t need a new arms race that would benefit no one and on the contrary would bring even more instability”. Both the US and Russia were put on an equal footing and no responsibility was given to the perpetrator: this too was not the best example of communication by the EU, as the consequences of the end of the INF Treaty will mainly be for the Europeans to bear...

Although a number of NATO Allies still wished to salvage the Treaty, the 28 NATO ministers of Foreign Affairs have shown solidarity in December 2018 in expressing their full support to the US: they found Russia in material breach of its obligations under the INF Treaty and called on Moscow “to return urgently to full and verifiable compliance with the agreement”. A number of them wanted more time in this choreography to explain the strategic importance of the INF Treaty to their home publics, silently hoping that Moscow would willingly return to compliance, but that did not materialise. One should also understand that for

a number of NATO allies the INF Treaty in these months has not always been the political priority it could, or rather should have been.

In January 2019 Russian officials in a static display for the first time showed a new version of the 9M729. This late move was an answer to the Western calls for more transparency, but it did not take away the concerns of Western nations, that even declined the invitation for this static show. The Russian military were pretending that the cruise missile had a maximum range of 480km: 20km short of the INF Treaty minimum range. Further Russian responses led to confusion and obfuscation: it is clear that ending the INF Treaty is not at all disliked by the Kremlin.

On 1 February 2019 Washington announced that it formally suspended its obligations under the Treaty, followed the next day by Russia. NATO allies reiterated on 1 February their full support for the US's "action in response to the significant risks to Euro-Atlantic security posed by Russia". They declared that "Russia will bear sole responsibility for the end of the INF Treaty". Washington gave Russia six months' notice to complete withdrawal, which will take effect on 2 August. That same day NATO secretary general Stoltenberg declared that "NATO does not have any intention to deploy new land-based nuclear weapons to Europe. (...) We don't have to mirror what Russia does. But at the same time we have to make sure that we maintain credible and effective deterrence".

A few days later the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) reported that Russia had deployed more medium-range cruise missiles than previously thought: four battalions, each equipped with four launchers with four missiles, were stationed in North Ossetia, close to Moscow, close to Volgograd, and one close to Yekaterinburg. This would mean that today Russia possesses at least 64

cruise missiles. Based on input from Western experts, the FAZ wrote that the 9M729 has a range of 2350km, while Russia maintains its position of a range of 481km.

NATO allies keep calling on Russia "to take the responsible path", as NATO secretary general Stoltenberg said. Allies have also expressed their concerns directly to Russia when holding meetings in the NATO Russia Council format. A last opportunity before the final date was a meeting at the beginning of July.

POST MORTEM: CONSEQUENCES FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY

It is very hard to imagine that making the INF Treaty a multilateral agreement would ever work as China (but also India, Iran, Israel,...) will most likely never enter in such a framework. NATO's missile defence system has mainly been an excuse, for the actual Russian problem with the INF is that third parties are not bound by it and are building up intermediate-range forces. Some weeks ago at an event in Brussels a representative of the PRC even declared that Beijing simply doesn't have negotiators for the nuclear domain. A "multilateral INF" is a dead-end street.

Undoubtedly, the end of the INF Treaty will further strain the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Washington, as well as risking to erode other nuclear negotiations and treaties. The steps that both nations are taking are indeed not helpful for the global security environment, but now is definitely not the time to put the transatlantic bond in jeopardy. Russian officials have already warned that "Europe will find itself in a sticky situation". Russia is well aware that its SSC-8 missile can potentially decouple American and European security as American territory is hardly within reach of the missile. At the same time there is ample potential and risk for internal division within NATO on the

delicate balance between credible deterrence and defence, and a meaningful and constructive dialogue with Russia. Solidarity and cohesion remain vitally important for NATO allies today, as they were 30 years ago, but equally important for EU member states as they are the primary targets for Russian missiles in a post INF Treaty scenario. The reduced warning time of its flight path will undoubtedly challenge consensus decision-making in NATO: rules of engagement should allow military commanders to take the necessary decisions.

Work on both components of the security balance contribute to Euro-Atlantic security and they will be necessary for the sake of European security: NATO will indeed have to find an effective deterrent answer to the challenges Russia's capabilities are posing, but NATO allies should also work and find ways to improve transparency through dialogue with Russia, which can be organised in the NATO Russia Council or, perhaps more importantly, in the framework of the OSCE.

The proliferation of offensive and defensive missile systems, technology and programmes will increasingly set the tone in the coming years, especially as 26 countries (including North Korea or Iran) have taken major steps forward. First, NATO should work internally on a better understanding and information-sharing on the challenge. Second, only a few European nations have some antimissile defence capacity, but a European industrial base and knowhow do exist. In the current security environment and in a future without the INF Treaty, European NATO allies should take up a greater share of the burden of missile defence, which is by definition purely defensive in nature and should therefore be more politically acceptable. Today NATO's ballistic missile defence is not capable of defending European territory against Russian missiles; it even is only directed against certain

threats from outside the Euro-Atlantic area. More broadly, NATO's defence planning process could take into account all consequences of the new security environment for both conventional and nuclear capabilities in order to preserve a credible deterrence and effective defence in a world without the INF Treaty: the enabling role of this process would also ensure an equitable burden sharing among European NATO allies.

If the new Russian nuclear capabilities are truly considered to pose a threat to Europe, the lingering debate on EU strategic autonomy should seriously take up this element: this would clearly demonstrate that Europeans feel the need to assume more responsibility for their own security at a critical moment in history: Europeans should become less dependent on American antimissile systems and become actors, instead of the spectators they have been during the times of the INF Treaty. In this light, EU strategic autonomy would truly work hand in glove with NATO's mission of deterrence and defend. As long as Europe remains absent as a strategic actor, only the great powers will continue to talk about European security, and they will do so in the absence of European nations.

As Russia is re-introducing systems that were eliminated by the INF Treaty, NATO's non-strategic nuclear capability becomes more important as, besides the British submarine launched missiles, it is the only nuclear capability to protect the European territory and to safeguard Europe from any blackmail or intimidation. NATO's non-strategic nuclear capability is the only one for which European nations hold 1 of the 2 operational keys to launch European dual-capable fighter aircraft with the American B61 nuclear bomb, for which they offer important national contributions to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission and on

which they truly have a say at the NATO table. France is not a member of NATO's nuclear planning group and operationally is not participating with its force de frappe in NATO's nuclear deterrent, a remnant of president De Gaulle's decision in the 1960s when he had lost confidence in Washington's supreme security guarantee. This demonstrates that a European initiative for nuclear strategic autonomy is highly unlikely, as nuclear capabilities such as the force de frappe will remain at the heart of national sovereignty. Maintaining nuclear sharing within NATO remains highly desirable therefore, as "the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance", which "as long as nuclear weapons exist, will remain a nuclear alliance." This will definitely not change in a world without the INF Treaty.

Is there a role for the European Union in a future without an INF Treaty? As long as the EU is not a credible actor, most likely matters of direct strategic and vital importance for Europe will continue to be discussed and negotiated above the heads of Europeans. Of course, European nations and the EU can continue to insist on the importance of arms control, disarmament, confidence building measures etc., and they can try to diplomatically influence the policies in Washington and perhaps also in Moscow. European nations will undoubtedly do so. However, the impact of such European approaches will be measured against the credibility of European power and against the capabilities European nations can bring to bear in the field of missiles, nuclear capability, launchers, countermeasures,... . And today these are all very limited.

The momentum of the process that the American ally in NATO has started in 2014 should be maintained: this allied dialogue fosters transparency and confidence. Such a

process directly informs the highest political levels in all NATO capitals and it assists those capitals in explaining to their publics what is happening. Washington should further inform European allies of steps it is undertaking to avoid a new arms race, to promote safety and security at the lowest effective level, to protect the territories and populations of NATO allies against risks and threats in post-INF times. Through talking and listening to allies, in other words through a multilateral approach within NATO, Washington stands stronger in addressing security issues with Moscow.

And finally, but not least, it is time that Western nations communicate more transparently towards their publics on the risks, on their intentions and on their foreign security policy. Stark choices will have to be made by Europeans: a new arms race, deployment of US missiles in Europe, acceptance of a risk of intimidation by Russia, a European antimissile capacity,... Populations must understand better why NATO and the EU are essential to European security. A world without nuclear weapons today is out of reach. In the current security environment nuclear capabilities remain central to European security. It is indispensable that European capitals shed more light on how this role is accomplished and on how they see their security guarantee without the INF Treaty.

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