
UNCHARTED WATERS: EUROPE AND THE END OF NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

Europe and the Atlantic alliance are entering uncharted waters. The end of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty has the potential to plunge Europe ever deeper into a security dilemma with the Russian Federation. Without the treaty's limits, arms racing, or at least the possibility of Europe experiencing a renaissance of intermediate-range missiles, becomes again a dangerous but realistic scenario. At the same time, the latest debates about NATO's forward-deployed nuclear assets in some Allied countries, such as Germany, put into question NATO's nuclear sharing as we know it. Taken together, these two trends could herald the end of nuclear arms control.

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In the summer of 2019, the Administration of US President Donald Trump decided to quit the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Since 2014, the United States had been publicly accusing Moscow of violating the Treaty by flight-testing a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) in the ranges banned by the INF Treaty (500–5,500 km).¹ Subsequently, US officials expressed concerns that Russia might have started to produce more missiles than needed to sustain a flight-test program.² Russia rejected the accusations and tabled a number of counter-allegations against the United States.³ The diplomatic back-and-forth finally culminated in the US' decision to withdraw from the Treaty—a decision with potentially wide-ranging repercussions for the security of Europe and East Asia.

The End of INF

Back in July 2018, NATO heads of state and governments had reaffirmed their intention to “remain fully committed to the preservation of this landmark arms control treaty.”⁴ Trump’s withdrawal announcement, therefore, came as a surprise to most US Allies. In the following weeks, US officials began to provide more details about the Russian violation. According to these public statements, Russia had tested a GLCM, the Novator 9M729 (NATO designation SSC-8, “Screwdriver”) from both fixed and mobile launchers, far surpassing a range beyond the INF compliance threshold.⁵ Even the German government, which had previously been hesitant to call out Russia publicly, shifted course. On 20 November 2018, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated “[they] [knew]” that Russia had not been complying with the INF “for some time.”⁶ In December 2018, NATO Allies announced that they “strongly support the finding of the United States that Russia is in material breach of its obligations under the INF Treaty.”⁷ A last-ditch effort to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis, suggested by Chancellor Merkel, would only delay US withdrawal from the

¹ US Department of State, “Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments,” April 2017, <https://www.state.gov/2017-report-on-adherence-to-and-compliance-with-arms-control-nonproliferation-and-disarmament-agreements-and-commitments/>

² Michael R. Gordon, “Russia Is Moving Ahead with Missile Program That Violates Treaty, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, 19 October 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/20/world/europe/russia-missiles-inf-treaty.html?_r=0

³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Comments on the Report of the U.S. Department of State on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments,” 1 August 2014, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/D2D396AE143B098144257D2A0054C7FD

⁴ “NATO Brussels Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels,” 11–12 July 2018, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm

⁵ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats on Russia’s INF Treaty Violation,” 30 November 2018, www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/speeches-interviews/item/1923-director-of-national-intelligence-daniel-coats-on-russia-s-inf-treaty-violation

⁶ Pressestatements von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem dänischen Ministerpräsidenten Rasmussen [Press statement of Chancellor Merkel and Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen], 20 November 2018, www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-daenischen-ministerpraesidenten-rasmussen-1552136

⁷ Statement on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty Issued by the NATO Foreign Ministers, Brussels, 4 December 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_161122.htm

INF Treaty. On 1 February 2019, Donald Trump declared that the United States would exit the INF Treaty six months later. On 2 August 2019, INF became history.

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Europeans could be the first to see the negative impacts of the end of INF. If directed at Europe, the intermediate-range weapons would give the targeted states almost no warning time due to the extremely short flight times of around only five minutes. In the words of Mikhail Gorbachev, the 1980’s threat of INF weapons “was like holding a gun to our head.”⁸ This effect would immediately come back, and it would pertain to almost all of Europe, should Russia deploy the alleged new systems in its western military district—perhaps including deployment in its westernmost exclave of Kaliningrad.

Such Russian deployments, if they were to occur in the years ahead, would also lend additional arguments to those warning of Moscow’s assumed nuclear doctrine of “escalate to de-escalate”. According to the drafters of the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), Moscow “mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to ‘de-escalate’ a conflict on terms favorable to Russia.”⁹ What they refer to is the fear of extended deterrence failure in the context of Russia attacking one of NATO’s militarily weak member states in Eastern Europe, perhaps in the Baltic area. In that scenario—so the argument by Western analysts goes¹⁰—Russia could resort to the early and limited use of non-strategic nuclear weapons to coerce NATO into accepting a military *fait accompli*. Without the capabilities for an immediate, measured nuclear response, NATO would then have little choice but to accept defeat.¹¹ Seen from this angle, additional Russian intermediate-range weapons would give the Russian military additional assets to hold at risk NATO targets deep in Western Europe and critical for reinforcement in the event of a military crisis, say (again) in the Baltic region.

⁸ Quoted from “Q&A: 25 Years On, Gorbachev Recalls Nuclear Milestone,” *The Moscow Times*, 6 December 2012, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/qa-25-years-on-gorbachev-recalls-nuclear-milestone-19978>

⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review 2018,” *US Department of Defense*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Matthew Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War,” *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2015), pp. 49–70.

¹¹ Proponents of that logic refer to the readiness levels of NATO’s dual-capable aircraft in Europe, which are currently measured in weeks and the assumption that the Allies’ aircraft might not be able to penetrate Russian airspace. According to NATO, its dual-capable aircraft “are available for nuclear roles at various levels of readiness”—the highest level of readiness is measured in weeks. NATO, “NATO’s Nuclear Deterrence Policy and Forces,” 3 December 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50068.htm#

Against a pre-existent background of NATO grappling with the worst-case scenario of not being able to defend the Baltic States in a conflict with Russia, intermediate-range missiles would further tip the already precarious regional military balance in favor of Russia, most notably by threatening to disrupt NATO's supply and reinforcement chains.

Even though most of such military considerations currently take place in expert circles behind closed doors and stay largely unnoticed by the wider public, the coming years might well see a renaissance of intermediate-range missiles in Europe, together with a political debate akin to that of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Missile Tit-For-Tat

With the end of the INF Treaty, Europe's security is once more very much up in the air. Two scenarios are possible in the years ahead. Both of them would, to different degrees, mirror past developments surrounding the emergence of the INF Treaty.

The first scenario—arms racing—sees Russia and the United States developing and deploying more and more intermediate-range missiles, though at a much slower pace and at much lower numbers than during the Cold War. This course would be in line with some developments on the strategic nuclear level. In his State of the Union speech in March 2018,¹² Russian President Vladimir V. Putin revealed a number of new or planned strategic nuclear systems aimed at offsetting America's advantage in strategic missile defense installations. Putin made it abundantly clear that Moscow views its missile inventory as the ultimate security and power guarantee. While a stance like this does not rule out the possibility of US-Russian nuclear arms reductions in the future, it makes it less likely against the background of the current political tensions, which are often described as a "great power competition".

Even though the Trump Administration says otherwise, reintroducing US ground-launched intermediate-range missiles to Europe becomes more likely now that the INF Treaty is dead. The Pentagon has been researching a new conventional GLCM and a modern medium-range ballistic missile since 2018. The first tests of these weapons systems were made in 2019.¹³ The latest reports from Washington indicate that a new GLCM could be ready for deployment in early 2021.¹⁴ Defense hawks in Washington would probably welcome a decision to fund these systems to the full in the years ahead, even more so as leaving the INF Treaty has finally untied America's

¹² "Russia's Putin unveils 'invincible' nuclear weapons," *BBC*, 1 March 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43239331>

¹³ Paul McLeary, "US Busts INF Wall With Ballistic Missile, Puts Putin & Xi On Notice," *Breaking Defense*, 12 December 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/12/pentagon-busts-though-the-inf-wall-puts-putin-and-xi-on-notice/>

¹⁴ Shervin Taheran, "US to Test INF Treaty-Range Missiles," *Arms Control Today*, April 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-04/news/us-test-inf-treaty-range-missiles>

hands in East Asia, where China could field as many missiles in INF-ranges as it wanted while the US military had been barred from reciprocating up to now.¹⁵ Whether the negative effects of the coronavirus crisis on the US economy will affect these costly plans is yet to be seen.

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In this scenario, America’s European Allies would face the daunting challenge of having to find consensus on what to do with the new missiles, that is whether and where to deploy them. This will not be an easy task given that NATO’s European members do not share a common position on how to respond to Russia’s missile challenge. While French President Emmanuel Macron is pushing ever harder for European “strategic autonomy” in the realm of defense, and perhaps even in nuclear matters,¹⁶ some members of the German Social Democrat Party (SPD) have been discussing the removal of some twenty US nuclear gravity bombs from German soil, which would result in Berlin opting out of NATO’s nuclear component of hosting US B-61 nuclear gravity bombs as part of the Alliance’s nuclear sharing arrangement.¹⁷

This second trend on nuclear matters—some Allies pushing for stronger disarmament commitments—has recently gained renewed traction. In an op-ed that received wide coverage in Germany, Rolf Mützenich, the Social Democrats’ party whip in the German Bundestag, and one of the most influential German politicians, urged the German public to engage in “an open and honest debate about the rationale for nuclear sharing.”¹⁸ According to Mützenich, Social Democrats “are not calling for the immediate denuclearization of NATO.” Instead, they want to discuss the need “to spend billions on the procurement and maintenance of US aircraft whose sole

¹⁵ Evan Braden Montgomery, “Managing China’s Missile Threat: Future Options to Preserve Forward Defense,” *CSBA*, 1 April 2015, pp. 6-7, <http://csbaonline.org/publications/2015/04/managing-chinas-missile-threat-future-options-to-preserve-forward-defense/>

¹⁶ William Drozdiak, “France is prepared to extend its nuclear deterrent to Germany,” *Washington Post*, 28 February 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/02/28/france-is-prepared-extend-its-nuclear-deterrent-germany/?utm_term=.8813e0a9ae06

¹⁷ Bojan Pancevski, “In Germany, a Cold War Deal to Host U.S. Nuclear Weapons Is Now in Question,” *Wall Street Journal*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-germany-anger-at-trump-throws-cold-war-nuclear-pact-into-question-11549976449>

¹⁸ Quoted from Oliver Meier, “German Politicians Renew Nuclear Basing Debate,” *Arms Control Today*, June 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-06/news/german-politicians-renew-nuclear-basing-debate>

purpose is to drop American nuclear bombs.” Katja Keul, the Spokeswoman on Disarmament Policy for the Green Party, stressed that her party does “not want to put Germany on a path of continued involvement in technical sharing arrangements by committing to the procurement of a new nuclear-capable aircraft now.”¹⁹

Fueled by the growing transatlantic rift—epitomized by the divisive rhetoric of President Trump—strong public opposition to a new missile arms race on the continent could easily resurface in a number of countries, not just in Germany. The Netherlands is experiencing a debate with striking similarities to the German discussion about nuclear hosting.²⁰ Quite the contrary, some European Allies, such as Poland, would be extremely eager to host new US intermediate-range missiles or even the B-61s currently deployed in Germany, for the simple reason that those missiles and bombs would come with the additional permanent presence of US forces on Polish soil. Poland’s offer of May 2018 to pay 2 billion dollars for the permanent stationing of a US Army tank division²¹ as well as Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s latest remarks to host US troops should Trump pull them out of Germany²² vividly underscore Poland’s quest to tie its security ever stronger to America.

In the end, under a possible second Trump term, the US Administration might simply sideline hesitant Allies like Germany and favor bilateral agreements with more supportive member states, Poland amongst them. This would cause massive political damage to NATO. Crafting a common political approach vis-à-vis Moscow would be almost impossible, and the Russians would in all certainty respond by producing and deploying even more missiles, which would result in further contentious debates amongst Allies.²³

The Final Chance for Arms Control?

Another problem for Europe is that Europeans play almost no visible role in the looming end of nuclear arms control. Back in the 1970s when the Soviets were threatening Western Europe with a new generation of missiles, it was West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt who was adamant in ensuring that Europe’s security

¹⁹ Meier, “German Politicians.”

²⁰ Michal Onderco, “Getting Out of the NATO Nuclear Task Would Not Increase Dutch Security,” *War on the Rocks*, 10 December 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/getting-out-of-the-nato-nuclear-task-would-not-increase-dutch-security/>

²¹ Edyta Żemła and Kamil Turecki, “Poland offers US up to \$2B for permanent military base,” *Politico*, 27 May 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-poland-offers-us-up-to-2-billion-for-permanent-american-military-base/>

²² “Warsaw hopes some U.S. troops based in Germany will be moved to Poland,” *Reuters*, 6 June 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-germany-poland/warsaw-hopes-some-us-troops-based-in-germany-will-be-moved-to-poland-idUSKBN23D0BD>

²³ In 2015, Colonel General Victor Zavarzin, a member of the Russian federal assembly’s Defense Committee, warned “If the Americans indeed deploy their ground-based nuclear missiles in Europe, in this case we will face the necessity of retaliating.” Quoted from “Lawmaker: Moscow can answer possible deployment of U.S. nuclear missiles in Europe,” *TASS*, 5 June 2015, <http://tass.com/russia/799098>

“In the end, under a possible second Trump term, the US Administration might simply sideline hesitant Allies like Germany and favor bilateral agreements with more supportive member states, Poland amongst them.”

concerns were properly addressed—first by publicly raising awareness of the Soviet missile build-up and then by making sure that burden-sharing and diplomatic outreach to the Soviets would inform NATO’s Dual-Track Decision. Today, Germany, still a key European NATO Ally, has taken a “wait and see” approach, with Chancellor Angela Merkel keeping the issue below the level of public attention. The coronavirus pandemic and its massive economic repercussions will make sure that nuclear arms control will continue to take a back seat. The result is that nuclear arms control’s perhaps last chance will largely play out as a bilateral game between Moscow and Washington (even though the White House would like it to be a three-way game with Beijing included). This self-imposed political restraint on the part of the Europeans may, one day, come to haunt Europe’s leaders—if a new missiles arms race should kick in on the continent.

The good news is that there is still room for political debate. On the suggestion by Germany, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in early 2020, launched an official exercise in strategic soul-searching. A newly appointed experts group, co-lead by former German Minister of Defense Thomas de Maizière, shall help develop viable security concepts for the 21st century as part of NATO’s so-called internal reflection process.²⁴ Clearly, arms control and the future of Europe’s security will be on the group’s agenda.

Another positive signal comes from some quarters in the US Pentagon. Some US military officials see no specific military need for new ground-launched systems in Europe, arguing that there are other military means to respond to Russia than simply producing and fielding new intermediate-range missiles.²⁵ Instead, the limited rotational forward deployment of conventional cruise missiles on US bombers and ships in Western Europe, supported by the limited deployment of cruise missile defenses at NATO’s vital logistics and transportation nodes, could well thwart the military advantage Moscow might hope to gain from allegedly violating the INF Treaty.²⁶

²⁴ NATO, “Secretary General appoints group as part of NATO reflection process,” 31 March 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_174756.htm

²⁵ Maggie Tennis, “Republicans Aim to Produce Banned Missile,” *Arms Control Today*, September 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-09/news/republicans-aim-produce-banned-missile>

²⁶ Ulrich Kühn, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Europe in a Post-INF World,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1-2 (2019), pp. 155-66.

These alternative military options might open up room for maneuver for a second scenario, which would be—against all current odds—an arms control solution to the crisis. In concrete terms, the military countermeasures already announced by the US in the 2018 NPR and legislated by Congress might well lead the Kremlin to take a more transparent stance, given that the Russian economy was also hit heavily by the coronavirus crisis and the parallel collapse of oil prices. Another argument is that transparency, on a reciprocal basis, would be most urgently needed. For reciprocity to happen, Russia and the United States could aim at “trading transparency for transparency”. On the one hand, Russia’s concerns about a potential dual-use applicability of US missile defense systems in Romania and Poland could be addressed by offering on-site demonstrations of the system to Russian inspectors. As one Russian arms control expert suggested, “Washington should agree to modify the tubes of the interceptor launchers in Romania and Poland so that canisters containing Tomahawks or other offensive missiles cannot be installed there.”²⁷ Such a solution would go beyond just mere fixes to the software, currently one of the distinguishing features between offensive and defensive capabilities. In turn, US concerns could be clarified by showing US inspectors the fuel tank capacity of the Russian missile that caused the end of INF.

A second option would be for NATO to make a no-first-deployment pledge in exchange for Russian geographical restraint. In essence, NATO would pledge not to deploy new land-based intermediate-range missiles in Europe first. Russia would reciprocate by relocating its SSC-8 missiles east of the Ural Mountains. The verification of Russian withdrawal could be achieved using a combination of different remote monitoring mechanisms to be negotiated between Washington and Moscow. France has tentatively expressed an interest in such a geographical approach but has not followed up with any detailed policy proposal so far.²⁸

Another, more complex, option, ensuring that missiles and gravity bombs cannot be used immediately, 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 at centralized storage sites, as suggested in a study by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR).²⁹

That way, both sides would increase crisis stability by reducing the potential for misunderstandings triggering an overreaction in an unfolding crisis. Such an appro-

²⁷ Sergey Rogov, “How to Prevent a Dangerous Escalation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 22 May 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2018-05-22/can-us-and-russia-find-path-forward-arms-control>

²⁸ “France’s Macron denies accepting Putin’s missile proposal,” *Reuters*, 28 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-missiles-france/frances-macron-deniesaccepting-putins-missile-proposal-idUSKBN1Y21E4>

²⁹ Pavel Podvig and Javier Serrat, “Lock them Up: Zero-deployed Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe,” *UNIDIR*, 2017, <https://unidir.org/files/publications/pdfs/lock-them-up-zero-deployed-non-strategic-nuclear-weapons-in-europe-en-675.pdf>

ach could apply to mobile land-based launchers and ballistic missiles as well as to NATO's forward-deployed dual-capable aircraft. A more recent study by UNIDIR came to the conclusion that verifying the absence of nuclear warheads from their non-strategic delivery vehicles could be possible.³⁰

A final reason to engage in arms control talks is the risk of losing the New Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START). The New START limits the strategic systems of the United States and Russia with ranges beyond 5,500 kilometers. New START, signed in 2010, entered into force in 2011 and expires in February 2021. On a one-time basis, the Treaty can be extended by another five years. In the United States, it would only need an executive agreement by the President and no advice and consent by the Senate to do so. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration has, so far, not taken up Russian calls to extend the Treaty for another five years because it wants China to join strategic nuclear reductions.³¹

The Clock is Ticking

Time is running out. In the spring of 2021, should New START not be extended, fifty years of nuclear arms control will come to an end. With any limitations be it either New START or INF, Europe's security could once more take a decidedly negative turn. The next few years will show whether the continent will experience a new missile tit-for-tat or a serious push by Allies for an arms control solution with Russia.

Perhaps the latest debate in Germany about the wisdom of continuing to host US forward-deployed nuclear weapons presents an unexpected opening for renewed talks amongst Allies about deterrence, reassurance, and arms control. In order to do so, NATO's internal reflection process on security in the 21st century needs to take arms control seriously. A number of viable technical solutions have been tabled in recent years. It is now up to Europeans to take political action.

³⁰ Pavel Podvig, Ryan Snyder, and Wilfred Wan, "Evidence of Absence: Verifying the Removal of Nuclear Weapons," UNIDIR, 2018, <https://www.unidir.org/publication/evidence-absence-verifying-removal-nuclear-weapons>

³¹ Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, "Putin Invites US to Extend New START," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/news/putin-invites-us-extend-new-start>