Backgrounder No. 8
April 5, 2019

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty: Historical implications for Belarus

Aliaksandr Alesin

Summary

On December 8, 1987, after two years of negotiations, Moscow and Washington concluded the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. This document became historic, since for the first time the great powers agreed to eliminate a whole class of weapons, which opened a new era in disarmament diplomacy.

Contents

1 What the INF did away with
2 INF Treaty: value for Belarus
3 Belarus's security after the INF Treaty

What the INF did away with

According to the INF, all weapons and components of the class were to be eliminated. The United States eliminated 846 complexes (MGM-31C Pershing II, MGM-31A Pershing IA and BGM-109G). The Soviet side destroyed 1846 missile systems (RSD-10 Pioneer, R-12, R-14, RK-55, OTR-22 Temp-S, OTR-23 Oka).

According to experts, the MGM-31C Pershing II posed the greatest threat for the USSR. The two-stage rocket had the range of 1,770 km and the speed of 8 Mach. The warhead was a nuclear monoblock, packaged in a maneuverable reentry vehicle, with 5 to 80 Kt yield. The miss distance was estimated at 30 m. The missile had a memory with the terrain profile for the intended flight plan. During the flight, the on-board computer compared the real profile recorded by the radar homer with the reference map.

It was an extremely dangerous weapon. First, the missiles stationed in Germany were able to reach Moscow region in 8-10 minutes, which could have been critical for making an adequate decision and its practical implementation. Secondly, the warhead had

maneuvering capability, which significantly complicated its interception. Thirdly, with a relatively low yield, but highest accuracy, Pershing II was intended primarily for striking heavily fortified command posts and strategic targets.

BGM-109G Gryphon was no fun either. The cruise missile had a variable-yield nuclear warhead maxing out at 150 Kt, capable of delivering the charge at 880 km/h. Nasty features included terrain-hugging in the final leg of the trajectory. Guidance system was a combination of the inertial navigation and terrain contour matching employing a radar altimeter.

INF Treaty: value for Belarus

> The conclusion and implementation of the INF Treaty was of paramount military and political importance for Belarus.

In Soviet times, the largest group of medium-range and shorter-range nuclear missiles was based on its territory: up to a third of their total number in the USSR. 28 silos and facilities hosted 318 medium-range and 271 shorter-range missiles.

First of all, we should mention the 267 self-propelled transporter erector launchers (TEL) of the then most advanced mobile RSD-10 “Pioneer” and “Pioneer-UTTH”, or SS-20 Saber as per NATO reporting classification. The operational range of this powerful system, dubbed "Bane of Europe" in the West, reached 5,500 km in its latest variant. The split head of each MIRV-type missile could bear three nuclear devices, 150 Kt each. Upon split-up, each warhead was individually guided to its target. The warhead dispensing mechanism had its own controls and solid fuel propulsion system. The design would place the missile in a hermetically sealed launch pod container (LPC) employing MAZ-547 transporter erector launchers running a 6x6 chassis. In addition to the LPC with a missile, the chassis also carried the equipment for technical control and launch.

Despite being about 80 tons heavy, the TEL was road-mobile, carrying the speed of up to 40 km/h on any type of roads, managing fordable depth of 1 m and climbing angle of up to 15 degrees. It could be launched both from silos with sliding roof and from pre-surveyed field positions along the patrol route.

According to official data, as of 1987, the USSR had 405 deployed missiles on TELs, 245 missiles in silos and warehoused. That is, the Belarusian group of deployed RSD-10 was the most significant.

Speaking of the Pioneers, one cannot help but recall the monster missiles created during the times of the legendary Soviet rocket scientist Sergei Korolev and kept hidden in Belarusian forests for a long time (they were in service for almost 40 years). These are 45 P-12 (SS-4 Sandal) missiles with a launch weight of 42.2 tons. Their relatively small flight range (2,000 km) and extremely low accuracy (circular error probable was 2,300 m) were offset by a 1 Mt warhead. Even graver mortal danger Europe posed the warheads of 2 million tons of TNT equivalent yield — the slightly younger R-14 (SS-5 Skean). Though, there were only 6 of them in the territory of the BSSR.

Furthermore, there were numerous smaller missile weapons deployed in our country, that is, tactical and theater ballistic systems that were to be scrapped under the INF Treaty. Thus, we had 179 OTR-22 mobile missile "Temp S", NATO reporting name SS-12B Skaleboard (900 km range, 500 Kt nuclear). There were also 92 units of OTR-23 "Oka", NATO reporting name SS-23 Spider (400 km range, 500 Kt warhead).

In the period from 1988 to 1991, in accordance with the INF Treaty 589 missiles from this arsenal were destroyed. At the same time, it must be said that the Elbrus missile systems, world-known as Scud, and the lesser-known Tochka, Tochka-U and Luna did not fall into the scope of the INF, since their range was significantly lower than the 500 km threshold.

But this was not the end of the missile saga for Belarus. Up until 1996, 10 regiments (81 launchers) of the intercontinental ballistic missiles RS-12M Topol (NATO reporting name SS-25 Sickle) were based on its territory. With such a nuclear arsenal, the Belarusian territory, naturally, was one of the main targets for a nuclear strike by NATO forces.

After November 27, 1996, when the last echelon with missile material left the Belarusian territory, many people were greatly relieved.

> At the time it seemed that Belarus would never again play the role of the Russian nuclear bridgehead targeting the West and, accordingly, be in the crosshair for a retaliatory strike of the eventual opponent.

Belarus’s security after the INF Treaty

A little more than two decades have passed, and the international situation in the field of arms control and strategic stability is beginning to change dramatically. We are witnessing the final days of the INF. Unless something unexpected happens in the near future, in August 2019 this agreement will become part of history.

> Already today it is clear that a new arms race is starting. Only time will tell what its parameters will be and whether one will be able to minimize its repercussions for the security of Belarus.

Among possible responses to the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, Russian military experts are considering the deployment of modern medium-range and shorter-range missile systems in Belarus (no indices or specifications mentioned so far). At the same time, Minsk declares its willingness to continue to adhere to the provisions of the INF Treaty. However, in case of greater military-political tensions, it will be difficult to do.

The publication is supported by the Belarus Office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Germany).
The content of the publication represents the views of the author only.



Aliaksandr Alesin
Independent military observer (Belarus)