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Up in Arms about Trump and the INF Treaty

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Summary

It is often said that army generals spend their days preparing to fight the last war. Political leaders, by contrast, sign arms control and disarmament treaties relating to the weapons involved in the last conflict. This may be to prevent a recurrence of conflict or, more cynically, it may be that the weapons have lost their efficacy and agreement easily reached.

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Refreshingly, the INF Treaty – signed by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in 1987 – had real substance in eliminating an entire class of ground-launched weapons and contributing to the end of the Cold War arms race. This makes Donald Trump's intention to withdraw the United States from the treaty, which will likely materialise in a few days, especially alarming. However, whether the end of the INF Treaty would be better interpreted as a cause or consequence of global instability is a tricky matter to judge.

Trump's intention: A consequence of insecurity?

For its part, the United States presses a case that withdrawing from the INF Treaty is a consequence of global instability. US National Security Adviser John Bolton, who many see as a major driving force behind Trump's announcement, said that the proposal reflects the 'new geostrategic reality'.

The claim shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. A bilateral treaty between the two Cold War superpowers in the 1980s could largely ignore other nuclear powers such as China, even though the Chinese had already developed an intermediate range missile. That

'reality' was enabled by bipolarity; it is far less plausible today given China's rapid rise in the power stakes and where its freedom from the obligations of Cold War arms control treaties favours it significantly.

> In fact, although the United States mentioned Russian non-compliance as a factor in its decision, it may have a keener eye on China when considering the utility of the INF Treaty.

Moreover, while Russia and China have forged a pragmatic friendship during recent years, Russian officials cannot be blamed if they feel threatened by China's freedom to develop intermediate-range nuclear missiles. Since Russia's purported non-compliance with the treaty predates the current tensions with the United States, one might argue that Russia's development of the Novator 9M729 (known within NATO as the SSC-8), which has been named by the US as the missile it considers the main violation of the treaty, has primarily been with an eye on China and not the United States.

> Indeed, Russia may be quietly satisfied to see the INF Treaty scrapped. Russia has previously claimed that the treaty is outdated and against its interests.

It is primarily a land power and the ground-launched missiles banned under the INF Treaty have obvious salience for national defence. If one accepts the claim that Russia was not complying with the provisions of the treaty, then it follows that at some level Russia would be relieved to be free from its obligations. In other ways, mind, it will be unhappy that the Americans may be signalling an intention to develop such missiles.

Trump's intention: A cause of insecurity?

Publicly, however, Russia will press the case that US withdrawal from the INF Treaty will provoke new instabilities. This view – interpreting the decision as a contribution to, rather than a consequence of, a deteriorating security environment – also has merit. Certainly, as I argued previously, the ending of the INF Treaty can only make the situation more precarious for small and middle powers in Europe by eroding expectations about the future. These states could find themselves in the range of any newly-deployed missiles.

The debate could be far sharper on what the end of the INF Treaty would really mean for international security. Those who invoke disarmament would seem to miss two important points. First, while the INF Treaty did bring about the elimination of a class of

weapons, and it did bring about a reduction in total numbers of nuclear missiles, it only constrains the two leading nuclear powers whose edge is being eroded.

Secondly, neither disarmament nor arms control treaties necessarily lead to an overall reduction of weapons: states can and do work round them. Similarly, Trump's announcement does not herald a new arms race; that would happen (and, I would regrettably add, is happening) regardless.

A missed opportunity

Trump's announcement makes the American side look blameworthy for the prospective unravelling of the agreement. The announcement was clumsy given that a bilateral deal to scrap the treaty might have been reached, which would have taken away from Russia the PR coup of being able to point the finger of blame at the Americans. A bilateral announcement, while unwelcome to non-signatories to the treaty, might at least have gone some way to reassuring both American and Russian allies that the two sides could work together towards something new. In this respect the evident single-mindedness of the original announcement was a missed opportunity.

> In some ways, only time will tell whether it makes more sense to view the decision as a cause or consequence of a deteriorating security situation; for sure – it is a bit of both.

Were new missiles to be deployed in Europe, then the former view would prevail. However, counter-pressures can be expected from allied states (both US NATO allies and, in Russia's case, Belarus) which, combined with a reluctance to host nuclear missiles, should make this unlikely. The deployment of new missile systems to Asia would better support the argument that the proposed withdrawal really is about 'new geostrategic realities', although whether an ability to deploy ground-launched missiles would really help the US in this respect is debatable.

> Don't expect the treaty to be saved. While it hardly surprises that political leaders would be willing to regulate or eliminate weapons that they think are outdated, both the Americans and the Russians clearly see value in developing new intermediate-range nuclear missiles.

More worryingly, given that Trump's attitude might be summed up in the Latin phrase '*si vis pacem, para bellum*' (that is: if you want peace, prepare for war), don't expect any new arms control treaties any time soon.

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