

## Ideology, Not Russia or China, Explains US Pullout from the INF

by Riccardo Alcaro

The imminent end of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which the Trump administration suspended on 31 January (leading Russia to reciprocate the following day),<sup>1</sup> is a significant occurrence.

Reached in 1987 by the United States and the Soviet Union, the treaty had a special place in the arms control regime because it was the only agreement that actually eliminated, rather than just set limits to, an entire class of nuclear forces, specifically those with a range between 500 and 5,500 km.

<sup>1</sup> Demetri Sevastopulo, Aime Williams and Henry Foy, "US Pulls Out of Cold War-Era Nuclear Arms Treaty", in *Financial Times*, 1 February 2019; Henry Foy and Demetri Sevastopulo, "Russia Pulls Out of Cold War-Era Missiles Treaty", in *Financial Times*, 3 February 2019. For the full text of the treaty, see: US Department of State, *Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty)*, signed 8 December 1987, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>.

The INF was a pillar of European security, as Europe was the main deployment theatre for intermediate-range missiles during the Cold War – and may well be so again.

The treaty was also one of the last few remnants of the US-Russian arms control dialogue, arguably one of the noblest diplomatic traditions of the second half of the 20th century.

If the INF was so valuable, why did it its signature parties – the US and Russia – let it die such an ignominious death? The Trump administration, which last year set in motion the process that eventually led to the treaty's suspension,<sup>2</sup> claims there are two unassailable reasons for its decision to pull-out: Russia and China.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of State, *Press Availability at NATO Headquarters*, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Brussels, 4 December 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/12/287873.htm>.

*Riccardo Alcaro is Coordinator of Research and Head of the Global Actors Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).*

Russia, the US says, has been in material breach of the INF since it developed a cruise missile with a longer range than 500 km<sup>3</sup> (in turn, the Russians maintain that the US missile defence system in Europe is inconsistent with the treaty).<sup>4</sup>

The problem with China is that it is free to develop this class of missiles because it is not part of the treaty, thereby taking advantage of the constraints on US forces.<sup>5</sup>

A closer look at these arguments, however, leads to the conclusion that all of this is little more than smokescreen.

If Russia's violations of the INF are really the problem, the question arises whether pulling out does indeed amount to an effective retaliation. The Obama administration, which first detected the work on the forbidden missile, followed the strategy of pressing Russia to respect its obligations while avoiding public accusations.<sup>6</sup> The logic was that, by staying in the treaty and forcing the Russians to continuously deny the alleged violation, the US would raise the political costs for Russia to deploy its new missile.

<sup>3</sup> Julian Borger, "US Says It Will Pull Out of INF Treaty If Russia Does Not Comply Within 60 Days", in *The Guardian*, 4 December 2018, <https://gu.com/p/a54fk>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Calls New U.S. Missile Defense System a 'Direct Threat'", in *The New York Times*, 12 May 2016, <https://nyti.ms/1Wt682x>.

<sup>5</sup> "U.S. Suspends INF Nuclear Arms Treaty, Citing Threats from Russia and China", in *The Japan Times*, 2 February 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/02/02/world/trump-says-u-s-withdrawing-nuclear-treaty-russia>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Says Russia Tested Missile, Despite Treaty", in *The New York Times*, 29 January 2014, <https://nyti.ms/1fogJ8c>.

Now that the Trump administration has pulled out from the INF, the Russians are not only free to deploy the treaty-banned missile with no legal impediments,<sup>7</sup> but are also winning the blame game.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the US pull-out has benefitted, not harmed, Russia.

If China is the problem, then Russia's violations are irrelevant. Whether Moscow complies or not, the US would still feel the need to address the imbalance with China regarding this class of missiles. This need, however, is more theoretical than real.

Intermediate-range missiles do not threaten the continental US (actually not even Hawaii) because the Pacific is significantly wider than 5,500 km.

What about US naval forces in the area? The US naval base on Guam is indeed within range of Chinese intermediate-range missiles. Yet, that is hardly reason enough for incurring all the risks associated with the end of the INF. After all, the treaty banned ground-based missiles, but did not cover air or sea-launched missiles (from ships or submarines). The US Pacific fleet is not lacking these (and others) deterrence assets.

<sup>7</sup> Aaron Blake, "Why Putin Won't Be Mad About Trump Pulling Out of the INF Treaty", in *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/02/02/why-putin-wont-be-mad-about-trump-pulling-out-inf-treaty>.

<sup>8</sup> Steve Pifer, "The Blame Game Begins Over the INF Treaty's Demise, and Washington Is Losing", in *Order from Chaos*, 25 January 2019, <https://brook.gs/2sPAEcR>.

Furthermore, if the Trump administration's decision was based on the assessment that the INF was no longer in the US interest, one would expect the US to be making preparations to address and mitigate the consequences of terminating the treaty for Europe and Asia.

How would the US respond to the possibility of Russia making European capitals the potential target of its own missiles, as the Soviet Union did before the INF was concluded?

The only chance to reduce Europe's vulnerability is to deploy US nuclear-armed missiles to the Old Continent. Even in the early 1980s, when the threat of Soviet missiles was real and US prestige in Europe higher than today, the move was extremely controversial, and there is no hint that European governments – with the exception, perhaps, of Poland – are keen to take such a political risk.<sup>9</sup>

The same applies to Asia, as the deployment of nuclear-armed US missiles is a non-starter in South Korea and politically very costly in Japan as well as any other US ally in the area.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, the US has announced no plan to develop an intermediate-range missile (which could take years), nor has it so far shown any intention

to deploy nuclear-armed missiles in foreign countries.

As a result, neither Russia nor China seem reasonable justifications for the US leaving the INF. Why has the US adopted such a short-sighted measure?

The reasons lie neither in strategy nor geopolitics, but in the ideological assumption according to which any kind of binding agreement represents an infringement of US sovereignty. President Donald Trump is instinctively attracted to this caricature of a notion of national sovereignty. And whispering in his ears is another champion of unrestrained sovereignty, National Security Advisor, John Bolton.

Attesting to the above is Bolton's impeccable record in opposing non-proliferation and arms control agreements. This most undiplomatic of US diplomats has not only been the main proponent of ditching the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran nuclear deal.<sup>11</sup>

In his previous incarnation as undersecretary of state under George W. Bush, Bolton worked hard to get the US out of the 1972 Treaty banning anti-ballistic missile defences (ABM Treaty) and sabotaged the 1994 Agreed Framework between the US and North Korea, which limited the latter's uranium enrichment programme.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jim Heintz, "Growing Concern in Europe After U.S. Leaves Nuclear Weapons Treaty With Russia", in *Time*, 1 February 2019, <http://time.com/5518914>.

<sup>10</sup> Pranay Vaddi, "Leaving the INF Treaty Won't Help Trump Counter China", in *Carnegie Articles*, 31 January 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/78262>.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Bolton, "How to Get Out of the Iran Nuclear Deal", in *National Review*, 28 August 2017, <https://wp.me/p9ETkv-2d1I>.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Mufson and Sharon LaFraniere, "ABM Withdrawal A Turning Point In Arms Control", in *The Washington Post*, 13 December 2001, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/>

While Bolton likely sees this track record as an unprecedented success, much of the rest of the world is of a different mind.

The deployment of a US-built missile defence system to Europe has hugely strained relations with Russia. After the collapse of the Agreed Framework, North Korea left the Non-Proliferation Treaty and developed its own nuclear arsenal, turning Northeast Asia into a major flashpoint of international security. And if the Trump administration manages to make life within the JCPOA intolerable for Iran in spite of Europe's efforts to keep the deal alive,<sup>13</sup> the consequences for the non-proliferation regime and Middle Eastern stability may be disastrous. It is worth underlining that in the face of such negative developments, the US has gained no appreciable benefit.

One may legitimately ask why a man such as Bolton, whose counsel has proved so harmful, keeps having the president's ear.

The answer is that the Atlantic and Pacific oceans protect the US not only from the threat of intermediate-range missiles, but also from the direst consequences of the aggressive

sovereigntist unilateralism of ideologues like Bolton. Once again in this early phase of the new century, it will be others who will pay the price of the ill-advised choices of a US administration.

*5 February 2019*

politics/2001/12/13/abm-withdrawal-a-turning-point-in-arms-control/0ba2144c-1bbc-4ccd-ae82-46eb30fd1c22; Nick Visser and Jesselyn Cook, "N. Korea Experts Tear Into Bolton: 'He's Never Met A Country He Hasn't Wanted To Destroy'", in *The Huffington Post*, 23 March 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/john-bolton-trump-north-korea\\_us\\_5ab454cfe4b054d118e15733](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/john-bolton-trump-north-korea_us_5ab454cfe4b054d118e15733).

<sup>13</sup> Riccardo Alcaro, "Crunch Time for Europe to Save the Iran Nuclear Deal", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|07 (January 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9941>.

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two book series (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì ([a.dessi@iai.it](mailto:a.dessi@iai.it))

- 19 | 08 Riccardo Alcaro, *Ideology, Not Russia or China, Explains US Pullout from the INF*
- 19 | 07 Riccardo Alcaro, *Crunch Time for Europe to Save the Iran Nuclear Deal*
- 19 | 06 Nathalie Tocci, *Navigating Complexity: The EU's Rationale in the 21st Century*
- 19 | 05 Lorenzo Colantoni, *China's Vision of an Ecological Civilisation: A Struggle for Environmental Leadership in the Era of Climate Change*
- 19 | 04 Nicoletta Pirozzi and Matteo Bonomi, *A New Idea of Europe: The Challenge of Flexibility*
- 19 | 03 Jørgen Jensehaugen, *Saudi Arabia as a Peace Peddler? The Limits of Riyadh's Influence over Israeli–Palestinian Diplomacy*
- 19 | 02 Ferruccio Pastore, *Not So Global, Not So Compact. Reflections on the Shitstorm Surrounding the Global Compact for Migration*
- 19 | 01 Petr Kratochvíl, *A Cordon Populiste from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea: Is a New Populist Alliance Emerging in the EU?*
- 18 | 71 Francesca Capano, *Prisons and Radicalization: Breaking the Cycle through Rehabilitation*
- 18 | 70 Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, *Italy's Unruly Rulers*