

The INF Treaty and Peace Movements Then and Now, Abolition 2000 Webinar “Preserve the INF Treaty,” presentation, January 17, 2019.

*by Andrew Lichterman**

I will start off with an overview of the Treaty and recent developments. Then I want to talk a bit about the moment that gave rise to the Treaty, including the movements that played a part in bringing it about, and their implications for our work today.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was signed by the United States and the Soviet Union in December 1987. It entered into force in June 1988. The Treaty prohibits the two countries from deploying both nuclear and conventional ground launched missiles with ranges between 500 and 5500 kilometers, or about 310 to 3420 miles.

It is worth noting that at the time few foresaw that the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union was imminent.

In late October, Trump announced the intent to withdraw from the Treaty. After consultation with NATO allies, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that the US would hold off on suspension of the treaty until early February.

The main reason cited for withdrawal is that Russia has tested and deployed ground-launched cruise missiles the treaty prohibits. Russia denies that the missiles violate the treaty and has made its own accusations, foremost that US ballistic missile defense launchers installed in Eastern Europe could be used to house treaty-prohibited cruise missiles.

The INF Treaty provides for a Special Verification Commission. The Commission is supposed to meet at the request of either party to resolve compliance issues. Since the U.S. first raised the current compliance issues in 2013, the Commission has met twice, in late 2016 and then again in late 2017. There have been a number of other less formal contacts as well.

To the outside observer these meetings did not appear to be very substantive efforts to resolve the dispute. It should be noted that these contacts occurred in a climate of relations between the US and Russia that declined sharply following the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014.

Since the Trump administration announced the US intention to withdraw, the Russian government has on several occasions indicated its willingness to continue to negotiate with the United States to resolve the compliance issues. In December Russia sponsored a United Nations General Assembly resolution calling for preservation of the Treaty and for the two countries to consult on compliance. That resolution was rejected by the General Assembly in a vote in which abstentions nearly outnumbered the votes for or against.

The day before yesterday U.S. and Russian officials met in Geneva to discuss the status of the treaty. It was reported that the U.S. demanded that Russia destroy the cruise missiles in

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question, apparently without recourse to any further negotiation or verification.¹ The U.S. also dismissed Russian offers of inspection. The language of the briefing at NATO yesterday by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control Andrea Thompson and US Permanent NATO Representative Hutchinson was a bit murky, but it appears that the US will initiate the withdrawal process on February 2.²

The INF Treaty allows either party to withdraw on six-months notice “if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests.” A dispute over compliance does not automatically authorize withdrawal. It should be noted that resolution of disputes over compliance can go on for a very long time when the parties want a Treaty to remain in effect.

The Trump administration has firmly asserted that Russia has violated the treaty, and the NATO states have backed that assertion. But the administration has not made the case that the missiles in question pose a threat that significantly affects the military balance between Russia and the very large and capable forces of the United States and its NATO allies, much less constituting an “extraordinary” development jeopardizing US “supreme interests.”

President Trump has also indicated that withdrawal is premised in part on a buildup of intermediate-range missiles by China, which is not a party to the treaty. Here too no case has been made that these missiles, which are based in China’s national territory, are best answered in kind by US deployment of intermediate-range missiles. Nor has it been demonstrated that peace and stability in that region or the world will be enhanced by repudiating the treaty rather than seeking more comprehensive arms control measures aimed at braking an emerging multipolar arms race.

Further, in either Europe or Asia, US ground-based intermediate-range missiles would have to be deployed in other countries. This likely would spark opposition from their populations—a factor that three decades ago contributed to the negotiation of the INF Treaty itself.

The missiles the Treaty prohibits increase the risk of miscalculation or misadventure in a crisis. Missiles of this kind may be forward deployed and intermingled with other forces. If deployed within range of strategically significant sites such as the strategic forces and command centers of an adversary, shorter warning times give an adversary less time to evaluate a possible attack, increasing incentives to keep forces on high alert. Advances in stealth and accuracy make even conventionally-armed missiles a more significant factor. New intermediate range missiles would join a mix of stealthy delivery platforms, increasingly capable missile defenses, and modes of cyber and electronic attack that disrupt sensing and communications systems. All of this adds to the dangers of confrontations between advanced militaries whose speed and complexity already challenge human comprehension.

It is important to note that arms control agreements, and the institutions and verification mechanisms that sustain and are sustained by them, can reduce the risk of war in ways that go beyond the limitation of particular dangerous armaments. The process of negotiating possible arms control agreements, even when prospects for tangible progress seem grim, has independent value in a period of growing tensions among nuclear armed states. They allow the military and political leadership of the adversaries to better understand each other’s intentions, and their fears.

They build broader channels of communication between military and government bureaucracies that can be of tremendous value when tensions rise.³

The best course would be to use the dispute over the INF Treaty as a moment to renew, rather than discard, the negotiating frameworks and institutions that played a significant role in avoiding catastrophe during the Cold War. But as noted earlier, it is apparent that the US plans to go forward with the withdrawal process.

There is a legitimate question as to whether it is constitutional for a U.S. president to withdraw from a Senate-ratified treaty over Congressional opposition. However, such core foreign policy controversies seldom are finally resolved by the courts. But there are ways that the U.S. Congress could act that might preserve enough of a status quo to leave space for future diplomacy. It has the practical power to prevent the administration from taking action contrary to the INF Treaty. Most important, it can refuse to fund weapons testing, production, or deployment that would violate the treaty. Senator Jeff Merkley and six colleagues have introduced the Prevention of Arms Race Act of 2018 (S.3667). It characterizes withdrawal from the INF Treaty without consultation with Congress as “a serious breach of Congress’s proper constitutional role as a co-equal branch of government,” and erects barriers to spending on missiles that would violate the treaty.

Now I’d like to say a bit about disarmament work going forward, in light of lessons we might draw from the movements in the period leading up to the INF treaty. We appear to be facing a period of renewed arms racing, one in which prospects for arms control are dim.

First, I think we must have more effective “inside-outside” strategies this time around. Those who work for arms control in centers of power must remember that large, mobilized movements calling for fundamental change are needed to really move the boundaries of the politically possible. Those working for deeper, broader change must recognize that it will take a long time, and that more limited measures that stave off disaster are essential. So we must be discerning about when to focus our energies on interim measures in a time when we need our main efforts to be aimed at building the social power to make real change.

Looking at the bigger picture, the Cold War is three decades in the past. We are no longer even in the “post-Cold War” period, a moment that ended sometime between the beginning of the 2nd Iraq invasion and the outbreak of fighting in Ukraine in 2014. The particular moment of opportunity for ridding ourselves of nuclear weapons created by the ending of the Cold War confrontation now is gone.

Some have compared this moment to the run up to World War I, with new economic and military powers rising to challenge old ones, and with potential flashpoints on the margins of declining great powers and their spheres of influence. But we are facing a new moment, and we obscure its nature—and our still-inadequate understanding of it-- if we leap to easy analogies.

Because we once again are in a period where the first priority must be preventing wars among nuclear-armed countries, we need an approach that goes beyond single issue disarmament advocacy. We need to focus more broadly on the forces driving high-tech militarism and war.

We are in a time of rising political mobilization, after two or more decades largely without broad, multi-issue movements in the nuclear-armed states. The potential for such movements is there. We will find, I think, that the best way to make issues of war, peace, and disarmament a significant strand in these movements is to explore the common causes of the dangers and injustices we are struggling against.

The most influential campaigns against nuclear weapons in the past arose in times and places where there were movements of this kind. And a significant characteristic of those movements was reflection and discussion about the nature of the society that produced these terrible weapons, and that systematically generates the risk of wars in which they might be used. This included the movements of the 1980's against U.S. missiles in Europe, the missiles ultimately eliminated by the INF Treaty.⁴

It was no accident that the Euro-missile crisis sparked perhaps the most intense moment of resistance to nuclear weapons. The inhabitants of NATO countries hosting U.S. nuclear missiles faced the possibility that a nuclear war could be fought on their soil without even their own government's consent. This raised a question seldom asked by inhabitants of nuclear-armed countries: Whose nuclear weapons are they, really? Whose interests do they protect?

This question leads naturally to others. As E.P. Thompson, one of the founders of European Nuclear Disarmament, asked in 1981, "Is nuclear war preferable to being overcome by the enemy? Are the deaths of fifteen or twenty million and the utter destruction of the country preferable to an occupation which might offer the possibility, after some years, of resurgence and recuperation?" and finally, "Are we ourselves prepared to endorse the use of such weapons against the innocent, the children and the aged, of an 'enemy'?"⁵

The people of every nuclear-armed country should be asking these questions today.

¹ "The meeting was disappointing as it is clear Russia continues to be in material breach of the Treaty and did not come prepared to explain how it plans to return to full and verifiable compliance," US Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, Andrea Thompson, said in a statement. "Our message was clear: Russia must destroy its noncompliant missile system," she said." Ben Simon, "Nuclear arms treaty faces collapse after failed US-Russia talks," AFP, January 15, 2019, <https://news.yahoo.com/nuclear-arms-treaty-faces-collapse-failed-us-russia-172048754.html>

² Press Briefing with Andrea L. Thompson and Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison, U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, January 16, 2019, <https://nato.usmission.gov/january-16-2019-press-briefing-with-andrea-l-thompson-and-ambassador-kay-bailey-hutchison/>

³ For more on this point, see Andrew Lichterman and John Burroughs, "Renew Nuclear Arms Control, Don't Destroy It," Inter-Press News Agency, January 2, 2019, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2019/01/renew-nuclear-arms-control-dont-destroy/>

⁴ "The heterogeneous groups which have coalesced in this movement say not only a plebiscitary "no" to nuclear missiles. Instead, many "no's" are aggregated in this movement: the "no" to nuclear weapons with the "no" to nuclear power, to large-scale technology in general, to chemical pollution of the environment, to bureaucratic health care, "slum clearance," the death of the forests, discrimination against women, hatred of foreigners, restrictive immigration policies, etc. The dissensus which gains expression in this complex "no" aims not at this or that measure or policy; it is rooted in the rejection of a life-form- namely, that life-form which has been stylized as the normal prototype- which is tailored to the needs of a capitalist modernization process, programmed for possessive

individualism, for values of material security, and for the strivings of competition and production, and which rests on the repression of both fear and the experience of death.” Jürgen Habermas, “Civil Disobedience: Litmus Test for the Democratic Constitutional State,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* Vol. 30 (1985), pp. 95-116, 110-11.

⁵ E.P. Thompson, “A Letter to America,” in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds, *Protest and Survive* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981) pp. 3, 38.