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Trump's Intent to Exit the INF Treaty:
Implications for US-Russian Arms Control and Strategic Stability
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President Trump has announced his intent to terminate the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, a major US-Soviet arms control treaty that eliminated an entire category of nuclear weapons in the final years of the Cold War. The expected withdrawal comes in light of ongoing US accusations of Russian violations of the treaty, first by testing and later (allegedly) deploying a limited number of missiles prohibited by the treaty. Expert opinion in the US on the expected pullout is split, as the move would have a significant impact on the nuclear security structure between the US and Russia. In addition, the emergence of China as a potential threat has aroused concern. China, not a party to the INF treaty, has deployed intermediate range ground missiles, and withdrawing from the INF would enable the US to develop the means to counter these missiles with ground-based missiles. As the US, Russia, and China are in the process of modernizing their nuclear forces, there must be a new, multilateral model to limit nuclear threats. China and Russia, together with the US, will have to play a leading role in devising the new arms control and disarmament architecture as a means to reach a new paradigm of strategic stability. An open question remains what impact the multilateralization of the US-Russian nuclear arms control architecture will have on other states, including Israel.

Speaking to journalists during a campaign rally in October, President Trump announced his intent to terminate the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, a major US-Soviet arms control treaty that eliminated an entire category of nuclear weapons in the final years of the Cold War. In explaining the reasons for the withdrawal, the President said that "Russia has violated the agreement. They have been violating it for years." He emphasized that the US will not continue to accept that the Russians violate a nuclear agreement and develop weapons, while the US upholds its commitments and does not do so. But clearly the President is also concerned with China's advances in the missile and nuclear realms, as evident in his remark that unless Russia and China come to the US and say that no one will develop these weapons, he will terminate the agreement. It is unacceptable for the US to be the only one adhering to the limitations set out in the treaty.

Should the President make good on his intent to withdraw from the treaty, the question is whether such a move will serve US interests, or whether there are alternatives that might better serve its interests. Additional questions regard how a possible withdrawal would affect European security; whether the treaty continues to serve Russian security interests; and what the impact of a withdrawal would be on overall “strategic stability” in the nuclear and missile realms, and on the future of the US-Russian arms control and disarmament architecture built up over the decades, from the depths of the Cold War.

The President's announcement must be assessed first and foremost against the backdrop of ongoing US accusations of Russian violations of the treaty, first by testing and later (allegedly) deploying a limited number of the intermediate range ground missiles prohibited by the treaty. Russia continues to deny the allegations, but has recently admitted the existence of the missiles. Moreover, in discussing the INF, President Putin is on record (in 2007) as saying that the treaty no longer serves Russian interests. In this sense a US withdrawal will free Russia to deploy its missiles, which according to Western intelligence it has already done. There is unanimous agreement among Western politicians and experts alike that the Russian violation must be stopped; opinions diverge regarding the preferable course of action.

Whereas Trump has at times committed himself to begin a new dialogue on strategic stability – focused on nuclear dangers – National Security Advisor John Bolton is much more critical of the US-Russian arms control regime. In 2002, he was a driving force behind the decision taken by the Bush administration to pull out of the 1972 Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM). It is perhaps ironic that Putin, in his introduction to the next generation of nuclear weapons in March 2018, said that the new nuclear arsenal serves as response to the US decision to abandon the ABM. In his latest meeting with his Russian counterpart and Putin, Bolton rejected Russia's request that the United States stay committed to the INF, although he expressed willingness to discuss the issue. Bolton has also indicated that the US will consult its allies in Europe and Asia, even though the European allies were not informed in advance of the President's announcement. In an attempt to diffuse concerns that a US withdrawal from the INF could undermine the nuclear disarmament architecture, Bolton pointed out that the US withdrawal from the ABM treaty did not undermine the overall arms control architecture.

Withdrawing from the INF would leave the New START treaty as the last robust pillar of the nuclear security structure between the US and Russia. Putin has called on the US to enter negotiations on extending the treaty, due to expire in 2021. But given the current state of relations between the two countries, and the emphasis of some key members of the Trump administration on the disadvantages of arms control for US security interests, there is little room for optimism in this regard. If the US pulls out from the INF treaty and

New START is not extended, there will also be adverse consequences for these states' Article VI commitments in the NPT as well.

While the US will not be directly threatened by the deployment of the Russian missiles, the same cannot be said for its European allies. The memories that ultimately led the US and the Soviet Union to sign the INF treaty three decades ago are still vivid, and the negative reactions of some members of the EU are thus understandable. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy underscored the importance of the INF as a “pillar of European security architecture” that contributed to the end of the Cold War. Yet the Europeans have not been forthcoming with new ideas or possible solutions, despite the fact that US Secretary of Defense Mattis made it clear that continuing the status quo is unsustainable, and called for ideas on how to deal with the Russian violation. It remains to be seen if the Europeans will engage Russia on this issue, and whether they will be prepared to pressure Russia to comply. A coordinated US-European response to avert a crisis within NATO has become more difficult against the backdrop of what the Europeans perceive as Trump's lack of regard for the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Expert opinion in the US on the expected pullout is split. Some insist that the US must engage Russia in an effort to clarify the mutual allegations regarding violations of the treaty. They note that a US withdrawal from the treaty will not only put the blame on the US, but would also enable the Russians (free of the constraints of the treaty) to deploy their intermediate missile close to the boarder of NATO members, thereby further destabilizing the security situation in Europe. If diplomacy fails, the US still has sufficient military capabilities (both in the conventional and non conventional realms) to maintain effective deterrence in the European theater.

Other experts, however, justify Trump's stance to terminate the INF treaty. They emphasize that if there are no consequences for ongoing Russian violations of the treaty, it is emptied of meaning. Moreover, this state of affairs undermines the essence of arms control, which is the building of confidence and trust based on mutual adherence. If one side adheres and the other side disregards its commitment, the agreement is worthless. A Wall Street Journal editorial (October 22, 2018) put the argument in stark terms: only the “high church of Arms Control” would blame Trump rather than Putin due to their belief that “treaties are sacrosanct no matter the violation.”

Where do we go from here? In addition to the problematic Russian violation of the INF treaty, Bolton has emphasized that “there is a new strategic reality out there.” He pointed out that the treaty was a Cold War bilateral ballistic missile-related treaty, but that we are now in a multi-polar ballistic missile world. In this regard, the foremost new reality as far as the US is concerned – and as reflected in Trump's initial announcement – is the

emergence of China as a potential threat to US supremacy in general and US interests in Asia and the Pacific. China, not a party to the INF treaty, has deployed intermediate range ground missiles, and withdrawing from the INF would enable the US to develop the means to counter these missiles with ground-based missiles. In addition to the challenge that China poses, there are ballistic missile challenges from states such as North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and India.

Trump has not yet indicated what the next steps will be, or when they will be taken, which leaves room for him to alter his positions. An upcoming meeting with Putin on the sidelines of the G20 summit at the end of November may offer such an opportunity. While Trump is regularly criticized for his overly friendly attitude toward Putin, the realm of arms control underscores that Russia cannot be shunned. The President's tough response to Russia's violations of the treaty must be followed up with continued dialogue and cooperation on this front.

Meanwhile, as the US, Russia, and China are in the process of modernizing their nuclear forces, and given the state of relations between the three powers, the likelihood of elevating arms control to a prominent place on their national security agendas is not high at this stage. However, a US withdrawal from INF could also serve as an impetus, as one expert put it, "to search for new models of reducing nuclear threats and strengthening global and regional strategic stability." That model – reflecting the new international strategic realities – would have to be multilateral. China and Russia, together with the US, will have to play a leading role in devising the new arms control and disarmament architecture as a means to reach a new paradigm of strategic stability. An open question remains what impact the multilateralization of the US-Russian nuclear arms control architecture will have on other states, including Israel.