

Intermediate response: Capability options for a post-INF world

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Key Points

- The stated US desire to withdraw from the 1987 INF Treaty has raised concerns about a nuclear arms race
- However, while new technology options will be explored, existing capabilities may help maintain the strategic balance

On 20 October 2018 US President Donald Trump announced that the United States was considering withdrawal from the 1987 US-Soviet Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

The announcement followed long-standing US concerns over alleged Russian treaty violations, especially those involving the development and deployment of the Novator 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM), part of the 9K720 missile system and known in US nomenclature as SSC-8.

“Russia has violated the agreement; they have been violating it for many years,” Trump told reporters, noting that the US would engage in dialogue on maintaining a ban if Russia and China wished to. “If Russia is doing it and if China is doing it and we’re adhering to the agreement, that’s unacceptable,” Trump added.

On 4 December 2018 at a NATO foreign ministers’ meeting, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the United States “today declares it has found Russia in material breach of the treaty and will suspend our obligations as a remedy effective in 60 days unless Russia returns to full and verifiable compliance”.

Under INF, parties can withdraw – giving six months’ notice of intent – if they perceive that extraordinary events have jeopardised supreme interests. “The six-month period will begin to run 60 days from now,” Pompeo said at the time.

At the meeting, NATO confirmed its position. A combined foreign ministers’ statement noted that Russia “has developed and fielded a missile system, the 9M729, which violates the INF Treaty and poses significant risks to Euro-Atlantic security”. The statement said that NATO supported the US position that Russia is in material breach of treaty obligations, and urged Russia “to return urgently to full and verifiable compliance”.

As 2019 dawned, any chance of Washington and Moscow finding common ground appeared to be fading. The US rejected an offer from Russia to showcase that the missile did not violate INF. Andrea Thompson, US undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, told reporters on 24 January: “What we laid out for the Russian

delegation ... was a test that's verifiable, and with the parameters that they'd [offered to] put in place, we would not have been able to verify."



A Trident D-5 SLBM is launched from the USN nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine USS Maryland in August 2016, during a post-refit demonstration and shakedown operation designed to certify the boat for operations. A reduced-yield warhead option for the D-5, announced under the Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review, may provide credible deterrent capability to offset new nuclear threats facing NATO. (US Navy)

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Thompson said that the US on 2 February would suspend its obligations to the treaty and would notify Russia that a six-month withdrawal period would then begin. She said that decision could be reversed if Russia verifiably destroyed the system and the missiles, but noted that "the pattern analysis would tell you that it's not going to change". This would mean the INF Treaty is likely to end on 2 August 2019.

Violation accusations

For several years Washington and Moscow have exchanged accusations of INF violations. Moscow's concerns have related largely to whether the US Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems sited in Poland and Romania could be converted to contain offensive missiles that could be fired against Russia. US concerns have related primarily to the 9M729/SSC-8.

In a November 2018 statement, US Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coates said that Washington assessed Moscow as beginning covert 9M729 development “probably by the mid-2000s”. Testing began “in the late 2000s [decade] and by 2015 [Russia] had completed a comprehensive flight test programme consisting of multiple tests ... from both fixed and mobile launchers”, Coates added.

The Trump administration’s first Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), published in February 2018, listed SSC-8 as “fielded”. The NPR added that in July 2014 “the United States declared Russia to be in violation of the INF Treaty for the development of the SSC-8”.

The 9M729/SSC-8 system’s capabilities remain unconfirmed. However, the missile is believed to be derived from the 3M-14 sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) and thus may have broadly similar capabilities. The earlier 9M728 missile (SSC-X-7/SSC-7/R-500) is thought to have been derived from the shorter-range export version of the 3M-14, the 3M-14E, although this is also unconfirmed. The 2017 US Defense Intelligence Ballistic Missile Analysis Committee report on global missile developments noted a 2,500 km maximum range for the 3M-14. The 3M-14E and 9M728 ranges are 275 km and below 500 km, respectively.

Russian officials displayed the 9M729/SSC-8 system in January and said its maximum range is 480 km, or 10 km shorter range than its predecessor, the 9M728. The officials said the two weapons share the same engine, fuel tank, and booster, but the 9M729 has a new warhead and guidance system that make it longer and heavier than its predecessor.

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