

What Does the Death of the INF Say About the US' Friendships?

Written by Rupert Culyer

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/11/18/what-does-the-death-of-the-inf-say-about-americas-friendships/>

RUPERT CULYER, NOV 18 2019

The demise of the Cold War-era Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty (INF) presents the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and its allies with a dangerous and destabilising change in the global security environment. The divergent security interests of both key signatories made it obvious that it was viewed by both as a hinderance rather than a vital protection against escalation long before the formal United States (US) and Russian suspension of obligations. US withdrawal from the treaty was ultimately unsurprising, but met with obvious exasperation by its key European security partner, NATO:

"A world without the INF Treaty is not NATO's choice. The Alliance, however, has no other choice but to address its consequences. The demise of the Treaty brings new military challenges from Russia and therefore new demands on the Allies to maintain NATO's deterrence and defence posture in a way that is fit for purpose." [i]

Clearly NATO and Europe as a whole is being forced unwillingly to deal with the consequences of a new arms race between its key member and security guarantor, the US and its fiercest regional competitor, Russia. Tensions between NATO and Russia are already at a generational high. The unrecognised annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ongoing but undeclared war in Eastern Ukraine foregrounds suspected interference in the national politics of several member states. At the same time, traditional security guarantees provided by decades of US policy towards NATO appear to be wavering; the current US president has on several occasions expressed his disdain for NATO whilst failing to hide his obvious admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin. The deterrent value of security guarantees made by NATO in turn to allies in Eastern Europe against Russia rest to a significant degree on the readiness and commitment of US forces in the region. US conventional power in Europe is, however, much reduced from its heyday of confrontation with the Soviet Union and is not likely to significantly increase in the short or even long term.

It is almost certain that the US cannot politically or financially afford to bolster its forces in Europe as well as meeting commitments elsewhere, and indeed the current administration has committed to reducing its global footprint. US military doctrine has also become increasingly reliant on the technologies of precision, such as Reaper Unmanned Air Systems (UAS) and Guided Multiple Launch Rockets (GMLRs) to win battles, which requires a smaller deployed footprint to be effective. In this regard, the collapse of the INF opens up the possibility of reducing overall numbers of US forces worldwide by adding additional precision capabilities. Similarly, Russia is procuring greater numbers of precision guided and stealth technologies in a drive to narrow the technology gap between its forces and those of its competitors, and to improve its overall battlefield performance. The US and Russia both likely view the death of the INF through this lens; an opportunity for capability procurement rather than as an escalator risk.

Without the limitations of the INF, both countries can procure weapons which can be used for long-range strikes against military and political infrastructure. Given the cost and relative scarcity of low-signature platforms such as F-35 which would currently fulfil this role, the US is likely considering intermediate weapons as a way of cheaply increasing their long-range precision strike capabilities. Prior to withdrawal from the INF treaty, Russia clearly indicated that it regarded it as a barrier to defending itself from similar weapons fielded by non-signatory China. Whether Russia faces an active threat from China is a moot point; intermediate weapons will give Russia, as with the US, additional long-range precision strike capabilities allowing them to overcome limitations in their own low-

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signature platforms. In an age where Russian defence spending is significantly lower than aspiration would warrant, it is likely to view any relatively inexpensive opportunities to strengthen its forces as a procurement priority. It may be that this utilitarian view of capability procurement explains the tepid attempts to maintain the treaty, and the rapid reintroduction of intermediate range weapons to both US and Russian arsenals.

The US will argue that deployment of these weapons in Europe is a counter to Russian weapons that were identified in clear violation of the old treaty. This justifies their development and deployment as being in the interest of NATO, but whatever the justification, US forces will gain capabilities in their arsenal to fight a kind of 'precision' war that they prefer, and can afford to fight, particularly on foreign soil. Critically for NATO and European nations the range of these weapons requires their basing relatively close to the site of their potential use. Both Russia and China are able to host them on their own soil whilst the US is reliant on partner nations and alliances to host them. Intermediate class weapons are not a threat to the US homeland, so their inclusion on US order of battle gives them increased capabilities in any theatre without consequences, the risks of which are passed on to their allies. Equivalent Russian systems are known to be at least nuclear capable which directly increases the overall threat to European cities and infrastructure whilst the overall threat to the Continental United States remains notionally unchanged.

Any calculation that considers intermediate class weapons solely as a force multiplier neglects their potential escalatory value, however. The Soviet Union planned to use a variety of Chemical, Biological and Nuclear weapons during any operations against NATO prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it is entirely possible that Russian planners will revisit these ideas as they integrate new systems into their operational concepts and doctrine. It was never clear, however, whether the use of battlefield nuclear weapons would lead to an uncontrolled escalation toward a strategic nuclear exchange. The US may be hoping that the strength of their deterrent posture as part of NATO means the overall risk of Nuclear conflict in Europe remains unchanged, but it is equally likely that just by changing the balance of capabilities between NATO and Russia, the US has wittingly increased any background risk of escalation during European conflict.

In this context, any notional gain in capability achieved by allowing the INF to lapse in such a limp and half-hearted manner must be called into question. The fielding of intermediate range weapons by the US is therefore arguably not advantageous to NATO. But NATO and Europe as a whole is placed in a difficult position as a result of their introduction. It cannot afford to lose the security guarantees of the US as an ally, but as evidenced by the opening quote, NATO and its members would not have chosen to allow the treaty to lapse. The nature of the power imbalance between the US and NATO is thus starkly revealed by the nature of the collapse of the treaty and subsequent US actions.

A lack of consultation around the demise of the INF treaty suggests the US is not interested in the viewpoints of its allies. This further suggests they will likely force NATO to accept the deployment of intermediate range weapons as part of a continued US conventional force presence. The current US administration would likely treat any disputation of deployment by allies as evidence of the declining value of trans-Atlantic relationships, further jeopardising NATO's own ability to provide security guarantees to its members and regional allies. The US is therefore forcing additional risk on Europe in ways that reflect its uniquely powerful position amongst the Western allies. It can force NATO to accept weapons that reflect its own strategic choices and preferences for fighting wars. The risk carried by US allies hosting intermediate class weapons is twofold: an increased risk from battlefield nuclear weapons, as well as the risk that any conflict could escalate globally and consume the planet. European leaders are therefore in a bind: reject intermediate weapons and risk snubbing the US or accept them and consent to the increased risk of starting a potentially devastating nuclear war on their soil. This is a stark and unpleasant choice that is likely to place additional strain on, and division amongst NATO leaders at a time where Russia is already actively working to divide the alliance. In this regard, and in this context, US actions reflect a declining interest in their allies. Although Russia may have thrown the first stone at the INF treaty, the US had ample opportunity to consult on its policy and strategy and have instead chosen a course of action which threatens the stability of historically important alliances.

Notes

[i] Durkalec, J (2019) *European security without the INF Treaty*, NATO Review,

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(<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2019/09/30/european-security-without-the-inf-treaty/index.html>) accessed 15/10/19