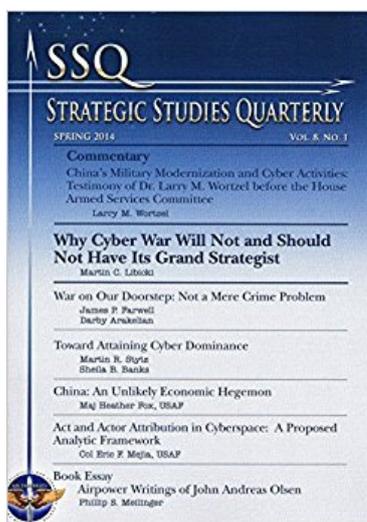


Russia, NATO, and the INF Treaty

by Ulrich Kühn and Anna Péczeli

Strategic Studies Quarterly Vol. 11, Issue 1, Spring 2017, pp. 66–99.*



Since 2014, the United States has publicly accused Russia of violating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, a landmark Cold War nuclear arms control agreement. In early March 2017, a senior American general told the U.S. Congress “that the Russians have deployed a land-based cruise missile that violates the spirit and intent of the [treaty],” and added, “the system itself presents a risk to most of our facilities in Europe.” The new U.S. President will face the tough decision about whether or not to remain committed to the treaty. This article recounts the history of the INF treaty and assesses Russian and US interests related to the treaty. It develops three possible future scenarios for Russian actions and their impact on, as well as possible responses by, the United States and its NATO allies. The conclusion is that

NATO allies will most likely face an ambiguous Russian stance with respect to INF weapons, which will make it difficult to find a balanced strategy, bringing together diplomatic and economic pressure as well as military means to respond to Russia’s INF violation.

INF as a Political Weapon

The INF Treaty, long a cornerstone of European security, is in acute danger of collapse since the United States and Russia are operating on the basis of different, indeed contrasting, logic. While the Obama administration had a genuine interest in maintaining the treaty and bringing Russia into full compliance, the Kremlin finds value in violating the INF.

In this article we start with a historical process tracing approach to understand the political drivers behind the development of the INF during and after the Cold War. We then develop a model of three likely scenarios of optional Russian actions and U.S./NATO counteractions on INF over the next few years. Our analysis shows that the Russian interest in acquiring INF weapons in the NATO-Russia relationship stems more from political than from purely military considerations, even though it is hard to find incontrovertible evidence to support this conclusion at this early stage of analysis.

* http://www.airuniversity.af.mil/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-11_Issue-1/Peczeli.pdf

Nevertheless, secretly produced and stockpiled INF missiles present a formidable opportunity for Russia to exert additional political pressure on NATO's European allies. Assessing the U.S. interest in maintaining the treaty reveals that Washington and its allies would remain much better off without a renewed 'Euromissiles' debate. So far, the U.S. strategy of combined diplomatic pressure and the announcement of possible military countermeasures has not yielded the desired results. Particularly if Russia were to choose the ambiguity option of stockpiling INF missiles in a clandestine manner, Trump might choose to step up the pressure.

We argue that any future responses in the military realm should be proportional to the Russian threat capabilities and that decisions should be based on an inclusive dialogue among NATO allies. Given the wide-ranging political and military consequences, a U.S. withdrawal from INF should only be considered as a measure of last resort. Indeed, European allies need to be more vocal and should begin to publicly voice their concerns vis-à-vis Moscow. They should also consider developing a genuine European strategy to punish Russia for its INF transgressions. Most importantly, allies should internalize the fact that it will take time and convincing arguments to alter the Russian logic.

Beyond the more narrow European perspective, Russia seems to find convincing military arguments for INF weapons in Asia. This circumstance offers Washington a genuine chance to engage with Moscow, as both players share mutual concerns there. A possible new negotiation framework, including China and other actors, could represent a breakthrough. But as it stands now, the INF crisis has the potential to become a major security issue for the whole of Europe and Asia over the next several years if it is not resolved in a cooperative manner.

Even if relations between Washington and Moscow warm again, the Russian leadership must understand that continued non-compliance will yield no political or military gains and will thwart any efforts to conclude a New START follow-on agreement. For Washington and its allies, this core message must be communicated to the Kremlin.

CONTACT: DR. ULRICH KÜHN

KUEHN@IFSH.DE

