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AN END TO ARMS CONTROL CONSENSUS

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International Day Against nuclear test vector design with nuclear vector icon design

The countdown on the U.S.-Russia Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty began last October when President Donald Trump announced that U.S. was considering a withdrawal. On August 2, the U.S. formally quit the pact. Concluded in 1987, the agreement had obliged the two countries to eliminate all ground-based missiles of ranges between 500 and 5,500 km, an objective achieved by 1991.

At risk is the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) signed in 2010 and due to lapse in February 2021. It has a provision for a five-year extension but Mr. Trump has already labelled it “a bad deal negotiated by the [Barack] Obama administration.”

In May, Director of the Defence Intelligence Agency Lt. Gen. Robert Ashley declared that “Russia probably is not adhering to the nuclear testing moratorium in a manner consistent with the ‘zero-yield’ standard” imposed by the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The CTBT has not entered into force but the U.S. is a signatory and Russia has signed and ratified it. Many have interpreted Lt. Gen. Ashley’s statement as preparing the ground for a resumption of nuclear explosives testing. Taken together, these ominous pointers indicate the beginning of a new nuclear arms race.

The decade of the 1980s saw heightened Cold War tensions. Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 provided the U.S. an opportunity to fund a (barely) covert jihad with the help of Pakistan. President Ronald Reagan called the USSR “an evil empire” and launched his space war initiative. Soviet deployments in Europe of SS-20 missiles were matched by the U.S. with Pershing II and cruise missiles.

In 1985, the two countries entered into arms control negotiations on three tracks. The first dealt with strategic weapons with ranges of over 5,500 km, leading to the START agreement in 1991 that limited both sides to 1,600 strategic delivery vehicles and 6,000 warheads. A second track dealt with intermediate-range missiles, of particular concern to the Europeans, and this led to the INF Treaty in 1987. A third track, Nuclear and Space Talks, was intended to address Soviet concerns regarding the U.S.’s Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) but this did not yield any concrete outcome.

The INF Treaty was hailed as a great disarmament pact even though no nuclear warheads were dismantled and similar range air-launched and sea-launched missiles were not constrained. Further, since it was a bilateral agreement, the treaty did not restrict other countries, but this hardly mattered as it was an age of bipolarity and the U.S.-USSR nuclear equation was the only one that counted. By 1991, the INF had been implemented. The USSR destroyed a total of 1,846 missiles and the U.S. did the same with 846 Pershing and cruise missiles. Associated production facilities were also closed down. In keeping with Reagan’s dictum of ‘trust but verify’, the INF Treaty was the first pact to include intensive verification measures, including on-site inspections.

With the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the USSR in end-1991, the arms race was

over. Former Soviet allies were now joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and negotiating to become European Union (EU) members. The U.S. was investing in missile defence and conventional global precision strike capabilities to expand its technological lead. Importantly, some of these were blurring the nuclear-conventional divide.

In 2001, when the U.S. announced its unilateral withdrawal from the 1972 Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), a keystone of bilateral nuclear arms control was removed.

The INF Treaty had been under threat for some time. The U.S. had started voicing concerns about the Novator 9M729 missile tests nearly a decade ago. As Russia began production, formal allegations of violation of the INF Treaty were raised by the Obama administration in 2014. Russia denied the allegations and blamed the U.S. for deploying missile defence interceptors in Poland and Romania, using dual-purpose launchers that could be quickly reconfigured to launch Tomahawk missiles.

Basically, Russia believes that nuclear stability began getting upset since the U.S.'s unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. As the U.S. used its technological lead to gain advantage, Russia became more dependent on its offensive nuclear arsenal and began its modernisation and diversification.

The U.S.'s 2017 National Security Strategy and the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) the following year reflected harsher-than-before assessment of its security environment and sought a more expansive role for nuclear weapons, in a break from the policies that had been followed since the end of the Cold War. Russia was seen as a 'disruptive power' pushing for a re-ordering of security and economic structures in Europe and West Asia in its favour. China was identified for the first time as a strategic competitor that was seeking regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region in the near-term and "displacement of the U.S. to achieve global pre-eminence in the future".

With the geopolitical shift to the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. believes that the INF Treaty was putting it at a disadvantage compared to China which is rapidly modernising and currently has 95% of its ballistic and cruise missile inventory in the INF range. Against this political backdrop, the demise of the agreement was a foregone conclusion.

The 2011 New START was a successor to the START framework of 1991 and limited both sides to 700 strategic launchers and 1,550 operational warheads. It lapses in February 2021 unless extended for a five-year period. Mr. Trump has indicated that a decision on the agreement will be taken in January 2021, after the 2020 election. Given his dislike for it, if he is re-elected, it is clear that the New START will also meet the fate of the INF Treaty. This means that, for the first time since 1972, when the Strategic Arms Limitation Act (SALT) I concluded, strategic arsenals from the U.S. and Russia will not be constrained by any arms control agreement.

The 2018 NPR envisaged development of new nuclear weapons, including low-yield weapons. The Nevada test site, which has been silent since 1992, is being readied to resume testing with a six-month notice. The U.S. Senate had rejected the CTBT in 1999 but as a signatory the U.S. has observed it. In addition to pointing the finger at Russian violations, Lt. Gen. Ashley declared that "China is possibly preparing to operate its test site year-round in a development that speaks directly to China's goals for its nuclear force". He suggested that China cannot achieve such progress "without activities inconsistent with the CTBT". Since the CTBT requires ratification by U.S., China, Iran, Israel and Egypt and adherence by India, Pakistan and North Korea, it is unlikely to ever enter into force. Resumption of testing by the U.S. would effectively ensure its demise.

A new nuclear arms race could just be the beginning. Unlike the bipolar equation of the Cold War, this time it will be complicated because of multiple countries being involved. Technological changes are bringing cyber and space domains into contention. All this raises the risks of escalation and could even strain the most important achievement of nuclear arms control — the taboo against the use of nuclear weapons that has stood since 1945.

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