

HAWKISH MOVE: ON U.S. PULLOUT FROM NUCLEAR TREATY

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: International Treaties & Agreements, and other important organizations

The Donald Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with Russia is a retrograde step. Signed in 1987 by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, it barred both countries from deploying land-launched cruise missiles in the 500- to 5,500-km range. However, Russia appears to have been covertly violating it in letter and spirit. The U.S. in 2008 expressed concern over the Russian Novator 9M729 missile tests and in 2014 alleged that Moscow was testing a ground-based cruise missile. Yet, the U.S. response cannot be regarded as purely retaliatory. Both Mr. Trump and his National Security Adviser John Bolton are on the record expressing what some consider to be a sense of disregard for arms control agreements. Before taking up the NSA role, Mr. Bolton said in his book that the U.S. "arms control theology" had been "kept on life support during the Clinton presidency by devotion and prayer rather than hard reality". Mr. Trump, who scuppered the nuclear agreement with Iran, has hinted he would refuse to abide by a treaty that other parties were disregarding. There is now a sense of alarm that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which limits both countries' arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles, and will lapse in 2021, might be scrapped next.

At the heart of this worrisome echo of the Cold War years is the changing balance of power in global nuclear politics heralded by China's rise as a regional hegemon; its growing arsenal poses a threat in the eyes of strategists in Washington. In 2018, the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review noted that Beijing was steaming forward with the expansion of its cruise-missile arsenal, potentially neutralising the capability of American warships that could seek to approach the Chinese coastline during a standoff. Shifting geo-politics also requires that European concerns be factored into strategic discussions on the INF, particularly because it is Europe that is most immediately threatened by the Russian stockpile. However, going by the surprised reactions from European officials, it appears that Mr. Trump may not have consulted with European allies before announcing the suspension of the treaty. Mr. Trump's thinking may rest on the fact that he could now develop ground-launched missiles, and perhaps keep Moscow's aggression in check through a military-posture superiority, and also save the exchequer some cash, for this option is cheaper than cruise missiles that can be fired from aircraft, ships, or submarines. Nevertheless, in pulling out of the INF, Washington is effectively throwing away leverage it may have had with Russia on an issue of global concern.

The Meghalaya government must urgently ensure that all illegal mines are shut down

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