

# PRESERVING THE TABOO: ON NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed countries on India's interests

Last month, U.S. President Donald Trump declared that the U.S. is quitting the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, a bilateral agreement with Russia signed in 1987. The decision was not unexpected since the U.S. has long maintained that Russia has been violating the treaty and Mr. Trump has been critical of arms control agreements because, according to him, other countries cheat putting the U.S. at a disadvantage.

Mr. Trump's decision has generated dismay and concern that this will trigger a new nuclear arms race in Europe and elsewhere. What it ignores is that the INF Treaty reflected the political reality of the Cold War — of a bi-polar world with two nuclear superpowers — no longer consistent with today's multi-polar nuclear world. The greater challenge today is to understand that existing nuclear arms control instruments can only be preserved if these evolve to take new realities into account.

Under the INF Treaty, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. agreed to eliminate within three years all ground-launched-missiles of 500-5,500 km range and not to develop, produce or deploy these in future. The U.S. destroyed 846 Pershing IIs and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs); and the U.S.S.R., 1,846 missiles (SS-4s, SS-5s and SS-20s), along with its support facilities.

The INF Treaty was widely welcomed, especially in Europe because these missiles were deployed in Europe and the treaty was signed on December 8, 1987 in Washington by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Reagan had earlier declared, "A nuclear cannot be won and must never be fought," marking a ratcheting down of Cold War tensions that had been rising. By the early 1980s, the U.S.S.R. had accumulated nearly 40,000 nuclear weapons, exceeding the U.S. arsenal. In Europe, Russia replaced single warhead SS-4s and SS-5s with more accurate 3-warhead SS-20 missiles, heightening concerns. To reassure its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies about its nuclear umbrella, the U.S. began deploying Pershing IIs and GLCMs in the U.K., Belgium, Italy and West Germany, setting off a new arms race.

Growing rhetoric made the Europeans nervous. Realisation dawned that any nuclear conflict on European soil would only lead to more European casualties, catalysing a movement for 'no-deployments' in Europe. In the 1980s, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. began three sets of parallel negotiations — on strategic weapons leading to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), on intermediate-range weapons leading to the INF, and the Nuclear and Space Talks to address Soviet concerns about Reagan's newly launched 'space wars' programme (Strategic Defense Initiative).

The INF talks originally considered equal ceilings on both sides but then moved to equal ceilings and non-deployment in Europe to address the sensitivities of allies. The U.S.S.R. wanted British and French missiles of similar ranges to be covered but the U.S. rejected the idea as also the inclusion of older 72 Pershing I missiles already deployed in Germany. To break the stalemate, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl made an announcement that Germany would unilaterally dismantle the Pershing 1s while the U.S.S.R. came up with a double global zero covering both

shorter-range and intermediate-range missiles.

The U.S. agreed, Europe breathed a sigh of relief and the INF was hailed as a great disarmament treaty even though no nuclear warheads were dismantled and similar range air-launched and sea-launched missiles were not constrained. Since it was bilateral, the INF Treaty did not restrict other countries but this hardly mattered as it was the age of bi-polarity and the U.S.-U.S.S.R. nuclear equation was the only one that counted.

Fast forward to 2018. Since 2008, the U.S. has voiced suspicions that with the Novator 9M729 missile tests, Russia was in breach; in 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama formally accused Russia of violating the INF Treaty. However, he refrained from withdrawal on account of European concerns. On the other hand, Russia alleges that the U.S. launchers for its missile defence interceptors deployed in Poland and Romania are dual capable and can be quickly reconfigured to launch Tomahawk missiles, constituting a violation. China has always had a number of Chinese missiles in the 500-5,500 km range but its modernisation plans, which include the commissioning of the DF-26, today raise the U.S.'s concerns.

The U.S.'s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) reflects a harsher assessment of the security environment faced by the U.S. and envisages a more expansive role for nuclear weapons than in the past. Russia is blamed for seeking the break-up of NATO and a re-ordering of 'European and Middle East security and economic structures in its favour'. China is identified for the first time as a strategic competitor 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'. A 30-year modernisation plan with a price tag of \$1.2 trillion with new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCMs) and low-yield warheads is detailed in the NPR. Russia has unveiled plans to develop a new nuclear torpedo and nuclear-powered cruise missile.

Even more worrisome are developments that blur the line between nuclear and conventional weapons. In order to lessen its dependence on nuclear weapons, the U.S. developed layered missile defences and conventional Prompt Global Strike (PGS) capabilities that use conventional payloads against strategic targets. Other countries have responded with hypersonics and a shift to lower yield tactical warheads. With growing dependence on space-based and cyber systems, such asymmetric approaches only increase the risks of accidental and inadvertent nuclear escalation.

The key difference with today's return of major power rivalry is that it is no longer a bi-polar world, and nuclear arms control is no longer governed by a single binary equation. There are multiple nuclear equations — U.S.-Russia, U.S.-China, U.S.-North Korea, India-Pakistan, India-China, but none is standalone. Therefore, neither nuclear stability nor strategic stability in today's world can be ensured by the U.S. and Russia alone and this requires us to think afresh.

The INF Treaty is not the first casualty of unravelling nuclear arms control. In December 2001, the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with the U.S.S.R. which limited deployment of ABM systems thereby ensuring mutual vulnerability, a key ingredient of deterrence stability in the bipolar era. The next casualty is likely to be the New START agreement between the U.S. and Russia, which will lapse in 2021, unless renewed for a five-year period. This limits both countries to 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBMs) and heavy bombers and 1,550 warheads each. However, Mr. Trump has described it as "one of several bad deals negotiated by the Obama administration". The lapse of the New START would mark the first time since 1968 that the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals would be unconstrained by any agreement.

The political disconnect is also evident in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the most successful example of multilateral arms control. It has become a victim of its success. It can neither accommodate the four countries outside it (India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan) as all four possess nuclear weapons, nor can it register any progress on nuclear disarmament. It succeeded in delegitimising nuclear proliferation but not nuclear weapons. This is why NPT Review Conferences have become increasingly contentious.

The most important achievement of nuclear arms control is that the taboo against use of nuclear weapons has held since 1945. Preserving the taboo is critical but this needs realisation that existing nuclear arms control has to be brought into line with today's political realities.

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