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Nuclear arms control in a post-INF Treaty period: a chance to engage China?

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The impact of US and Russian withdrawal

The US and Russia formally provided notice of withdrawal from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on February 2, 2019. Their withdrawals have profoundly shaken nuclear arms control on three temporal axes: past, present and future. Firstly, the INF Treaty -- a bilateral agreement limited to a specific category of weapons, that is, ground-based intermediate-range ballistic/cruise missiles (GBIR) with a range of 500-5,500km -- is the first nuclear arms control accord that obliged the US and Soviet Union to reduce their nuclear arsenals under intrusive verification measures, including on-site inspections. Its demise means an end to the historic, symbolic nuclear arms control treaty (the past). Secondly, the confrontational manner of their withdrawals and the US argument that China's missile development affected its decision suggest how seriously US-Russia and US-China relations have deteriorated. In addition, US and Russian deployment of GBIR following their withdrawals from the INF Treaty would undermine stability in Europe and Northeast Asia (the present). Thirdly, the demise of the INF Treaty -- signed by President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987, who shared an ideal of eliminating nuclear weapons and a conviction that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" -- has cast a dark shadow on the future of nuclear arms control (the future).

In accordance with the Treaty, the US and Russian withdrawals will go into effect on August 2, 2019, six months from the date of notification, and there seems little likelihood that the two countries will retract their decisions. Under such circumstances, whether and how a nuclear arms control framework in a "post-INF Treaty" period can be reconstructed, and especially whether China can be engaged in this framework, have become crucial questions.

The difficulty of a "new INF Treaty"

In the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the Trump administration regarded China, along with Russia, as a country challenging the existing international order. According to a report published by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission in February 2019, China possesses more than 2,000 missiles, 95% of which are GBIR (of which about 400-600 have a range of 1,000km or more) prohibited under the INF Treaty.¹ Nearly all of these missiles can carry nuclear or conventional warheads. Among those missiles, the DF-21 (range: 1,800km-) and the DF-26 (range: 3,000km-) can respectively reach Japan and Guam, and their derivative types are considered to have anti-ship strike capability. China's GBIR constitute one of the core weapons systems in its Anti-Access/Area

Denial (A2/AD) strategy against the US, and they pose a serious concern to Japan's security as well.

Since announcing its intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty in October 2018, the US has indicated its willingness to discuss a new framework of arms control with China and Russia. In December of that year, President Trump tweeted: "I am certain that, at some time in the future, President Xi and I, together with President Putin of Russia, will start talking about a meaningful halt to what has become a major and uncontrollable Arms Race." Needless to say, it is unclear whether and to what extent the Trump administration is seriously pursuing such a framework. At the very least, the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty and its development and acquisition of GBIR seem unlikely to lead to the conclusion of a multilateral or even trilateral treaty on reducing or eliminating GBIR in the near term as a "New Double-Track Decision."²

During the Cold War, the primary objective of negotiations on the INF Treaty was clear: maintaining strategic stability between the US and USSR by reducing the possibility of their using INF in the European theater, the top flashpoint, which would escalate into an all-out nuclear war. That is why, during the negotiations of the INF Treaty, they deliberated on the option of eliminating their INF from Europe but allowing Soviet deployment of SS-20s in Siberia and the Far East. However, out of heightened concern that this would threaten Japan's security, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone strongly urged President Reagan to reconsider the option, with the result being the global elimination of the US/Soviet INF.

By contrast, the present circumstances surrounding GBIR are much more complex. Countries in multiple regions now possess GBIR, and place emphasis on their roles. Russia, for instance, is alleged to have acquired the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) in violation of the INF Treaty in order to offset NATO's superior conventional forces; it also recognizes the potential of GBIR as a means of coping with neighboring countries such as China that possess GBIR as well as with those in South Asia and the Middle East. In the meantime, the US has started to consider the roles of GBIR in bolstering deterrence in Europe and Northeast Asia. China regards GBIR as an essential component in deterring and countering contingencies in Northeast and South Asia, and in hedging against a future deterioration in relations with Russia. The range of India's GBIR extends to China as well as Pakistan, which has also developed GBIR. In the Middle East, Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia possess GBIR amid complex regional rivalries.

Countries possessing GBIR perceive a diversity of security interests, which is reflected in differences in the types, numbers and ranges of their GBIR arsenals. The US and Russia also possess sea- and air-launched missiles that could substitute for GBIR. Furthermore, the US and its allies have deployed ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems, with China and Russia hot in pursuit. The prohibition on land-based ballistic/cruise missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500km stipulated in the INF Treaty could only be agreed on in the context of US-Soviet relations during the Cold War. It is hardly conceivable that common objectives and interests will converge sufficiently to bring about agreement on what missiles could be restricted or prohibited at present.

China's negativity and potential

Among the five nuclear-weapon states under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), only China has not reduced its nuclear arsenal. Beijing has argued that “[s]tates possessing the largest nuclear arsenals...should take the lead in substantially reducing those nuclear arsenals,”³ and when conditions are ripe, other nuclear-weapon states should join multilateral talks on nuclear disarmament. Regarding the INF Treaty, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang clearly said: “The multilateralization of the INF Treaty involves a series of complex issues covering political, military and legal fields, which draws concerns from many countries. China opposes the multilateralization of this treaty.”⁴ At the Munich Security Conference in February 2019, State Councilor Yang Jiechi responded to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s request that China participate in the INF Treaty by saying, “China develops its capabilities strictly according to its defensive needs and doesn’t pose a threat to anybody else. So we are opposed to the multilateralization of the INF [Treaty].”⁵

In regard to the US proposal for multilateralizing the INF Treaty, Shen Dingli critically noted that the US is seeking to prevent China and other countries from enhancing GBIR in order to maintain its regional hegemony, while these countries intend to mitigate the challenge in East Asia posed by the US. He also asserted: “[A]s the world’s strongest military power that is immune to arms control, will the US agree to disarmament of any kind? Will there be restrictions on mid-range missiles and long-range missiles? And are the US and other countries ready to start negotiations on such issues? These are vital questions to which the US should immediately respond.”⁶ It has also been pointed out that “[i]f the United States were serious about wanting China to join the INF Treaty, it would be talking with Chinese arms controllers about changes the United States might be willing to make in exchange for surrendering what Chinese military planners see as one of their most valuable military capabilities. There is no indication such a discussion has ever taken place.”⁷

At the same time, however, Tong Zhao noted that US and Chinese experts need to “find different means to build common understanding about how to mitigate risks from gaps in the security perceptions.”

Furthermore, he argues:

[T]he era of relying on the US-Russia bilateral arms control structure is at its end...As China becomes a top-tier military power, its fast-growing force projection capabilities will meet with increasing international pressure and resistance. It is time for Beijing to think strategically about how to best defend its long-term security interests sustainably: is pursuing cooperative arms control better than simply accumulating military power? As a rising power aspiring to shape international norms and principles, China can no longer follow the lead of others.⁸

China’s growing confidence in its power could increase the possibility that it will formulate and implement more aggressive foreign/security policies, and attempt to revise the existing international order. On the other hand, as its military capabilities increase, China – whose nuclear and conventional forces have been inferior to those of the US and Russia and which has accordingly been quite passive about participating in US- and Russian-led nuclear arms control efforts that may fix their relative advantage – might gain more

confidence in taking part in arms control discussions and negotiations. Tong Zhao also concludes that “China...perceives itself as possessing a uniquely superior military capability in [GBIR] and seems relatively confident in its long-term potential to outcompete the United States in a post-INF world.”⁹ Such confidence might be a clue to getting China to participate in future arms control.

Arms control for threat reduction

As mentioned above, it is not expected that any numerical control and reduction of GBIR will be achieved, at least in the near future. In the midst of growing major-power/geopolitical rivalry in Northeast Asia among other regions, China, North Korea and South Korea have strengthened their GBIR capabilities and emphasized their roles. In addition, the US and Russia may deploy GBIR in this region after their withdrawal from the INF Treaty. One serious concern is that relying more on GBIR would decrease crisis stability by increasing the incentive for first use. Besides GBIR, sea/air-launched cruise missiles (SLCM/ALCM) and BMD also have significant implications for regional security. How best to reduce and/or constrain the negative impacts of such offensive and defensive capabilities on regional stability and security is a pressing issue for China as well. Consideration should be given first to launching discussions among the states involved in Northeast Asian security, particularly the US and China, on such topics as the overall security environment, the need for missiles and BMD, and the risks that these capabilities could pose to strategic stability. Responding to cyberattacks against command and control systems for nuclear and missiles forces is another crucial issue. Covering the region’s strategic and security issues in these discussions may provide China with greater incentive to participate.

Improved transparency in the numbers of missiles possessed, their ranges, the warheads they carry, their deployment locations, and the doctrines regarding their use – all issues of direct relevance to the region’s security – should be pursued to diminish mutual distrust and misunderstanding. The countries involved, in light of their asymmetric capabilities, may be able to take an approach to implement mutual, equitable but different measures; for instance, China would endeavor to increase transparency in GBIR while Japan would do the same for BMD.¹⁰ In addition, regional countries could contemplate ceilings on the capabilities and numbers of these missiles, or limit their deployment sites/areas. From the perspective of security, Japan could ask China, which pledged unconditional negative security assurances, to distinguish between its nuclear-armed and conventional intermediate-range missiles, and not to deploy GBIR mounted with nuclear warheads within range of Japan. Meanwhile, it goes without saying that an agreement should be reached in the North Korean denuclearization talks on complete elimination not only of long-range ballistic missiles but also of medium- and intermediate-range missiles.

A possible transformation of the international system under the current power transition casts doubts on the effectiveness of the existing nuclear arms control architecture, including the NPT and US-Russian arms control efforts. To renovate or rebuild this architecture, it is essential to find solutions to the conundrums of addressing the asymmetries of, and significant differences in, weapons systems as well as the interests among the countries involved in major-power/geopolitical rivalry. This will undoubtedly require significant time, and meanwhile the unstable transition period will continue. Any efforts to pursue “post-INF

Treaty” arms control for GBIR and related weapons systems could not only reduce the risks of nuclear weapon/missile use, but also serve as a first step toward a next-generation nuclear arms control architecture. Therefore, this is a crucial policy agenda item that Japan should actively tackle.

- 1 Jacob Stokes, “China’s Missile Program and U.S. Withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,” Staff Research Report, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 4, 2018, p. 3, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20and%20INF_0.pdf.
- 2 The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) agreed in 1979 on the “Double-Track Decision”: if the Soviet Union, which was deploying SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM), would not agree to INF Treaty negotiations, the US would deploy INF in Europe. After the US deployment of Pershing II IRBM and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCM) in accordance with this decision, the Soviet Union agreed to start INF Treaty negotiations.
- 3 NPT/CONF.2020/PC.II/WP.32, April 19, 2018.
- 4 “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Remarks on the US Suspending INF Treaty Obligations and Beginning Withdrawal Process,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, February 2, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1635268.shtml.
- 5 Robert Emmott, “China rebuffs Germany’s call for U.S. missile deal with Russia,” *Reuters*, February 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security-china/china-rebuffs-germanys-call-for-u-s-missile-deal-with-russia-idUSKCN1Q50NZ?il=0>.
- 6 Shen Dingli, “What the post-INF Treaty world will be like,” *China Daily*, February 21, 2019, <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201902/21/WS5c6dea76a3106c65c34ea76e.html>.
- 7 Gregory Kulacki, “Don’t Scapegoat China for Killing the INF Treaty. Ask it to Join,” Union of Concerned Scientists, February 6, 2019, <https://allthingsnuclear.org/gkulacki/dont-scapegoat-china-for-killing-the-inf-treaty-ask-it-to-join>.
- 8 Tong Zhao, “Why China Is Worried About the End of the INF Treaty,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 7, 2018, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2018/11/07/why-china-is-worried-about-end-of-inf-treaty-pub-77669>.
- 9 Tong Zhao, “An Inquiry into the NPT and Nuclear Disarmament,” Testimony, U.K. House of Lords, February 12, 2019, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2019/02/12/inquiry-into-npt-and-nuclear-disarmament-pub-78574>.
- 10 Lewis A. Dunn, “Exploring the Role of U.S.-China Mutual and Cooperative Strategic Restraint,” Lewis A. Dunn, ed., *Building toward a Stable and Cooperative Long-Term U.S.-China Strategic Relationship*, Science Applications International Corporation, The Pacific Forum CSIS, and China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, December 2012, p. 75.

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