

The Demise of the INF

Implications for Russia-China Relations

Samuel Charap

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The Demise of the INF: Implications for Russia-China Relations

Testimony of Samuel Charap¹
The RAND Corporation²

Statement for the Record for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

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In this testimony, I will assess the implications of the U.S.-Russia impasse over the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) for China-Russia relations. I begin with some background on the different Russian and Chinese approaches to arms control generally. I then describe China's approach to the negotiations that produced the INF in the 1980s. Finally, I suggest some potential future scenarios resulting from the INF's demise and each scenario's effect on Russia-China relations.

Different Russian and Chinese Approaches to Arms Control

There are broad divergences in Moscow's and Beijing's approaches to arms control, and particularly nuclear arms control.³ These divergences have their roots in the two countries' different historical experiences relating to nuclear weapons. Moscow's nuclear force posture has always been shaped by the strategic imperative of parity with the United States. This imperative led both to the Cold War-era arms race and its antidote: arms control and reductions. Since the inception of nuclear arms limitations in the early 1970s, the bilateral U.S.-Soviet/Russian dyad developed a number of unique characteristics: the explicit acknowledgement of mutual vulnerability to retaliatory strikes as a stabilizing factor; both sides' maintenance of counterforce first-strike options, which required relative numerical parity of warheads and delivery systems; and the interlinkage between offensive and defensive systems. Since then, the United States and the Soviet Union (and then Russia) have lowered their numbers largely through bilateral accords. They also used arms control, at least initially, to limit severely certain systems (e.g., ballistic

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

² The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

³ I address arms control only here, not nonproliferation regimes, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or the Missile Technology Control Regime.

missile defense via the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty) or entire classes of weapons (e.g., intermediate-range land-based missiles through the INF). Essentially, through this process, Washington and Moscow developed a concept of mutual nuclear deterrence and stability that was shared and thus interdependent.

China, by contrast, has never seemed to believe it necessary to hold either the Soviet/Russian or the U.S. arsenals at risk or to achieve numerical parity with either power. Beijing has thus never had the imperative to engage in an arms race with either nuclear superpower or to engage in arms control to curb such a race. China is publicly reported to have less than 300 strategic warheads, compared with the 1,550 allowed to the United States and Russia under the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START).⁴ Beijing has long stated that the United States and Russia need to further reduce their arsenals in order to justify China's participation in reductions and limitations. China has thus had none of the nearly half-century of experience of arms control negotiations and implementation that Russia and the United States have. While broadly supportive of U.S.-Russia arms control, Beijing has deliberately stayed on the sidelines.

China and the INF

Although the INF is not, strictly speaking, a nuclear arms control agreement (*inter alia*, it bans all ground-launched cruise missiles [GLCMs], including ones with conventional warheads), it was a direct outgrowth of the particularities of the U.S.-Soviet nuclear dyad and of U.S. extended deterrence obligations to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in Europe. The Soviet deployment of SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) in Europe risked “nuclear decoupling;” that is, it would have allowed Moscow to conduct nuclear strikes on Western European capitals without attacking the United States. Meanwhile, the U.S. deployment of Pershing II IRBMs and GLCMs to NATO Europe posed a decapitation threat to the Soviets, dramatically reducing warning time before potential U.S. strikes on key Soviet command and control (C2) nodes. The INF thus reinforced stability through mutual vulnerability by eliminating these dynamics. The treaty was an organic outgrowth of the circumstances of this bilateral relationship.

While the INF was fundamentally driven by dynamics in European security, it did have significant implications for East Asian security. At the time the INF talks began, Sino-Soviet relations were highly adversarial; China sought to form a united front with the West against perceived Soviet expansionism. China even supported NATO's “dual-track” decision and specifically the deployment of Pershing II missiles and GLCMs to Europe.⁵ The Soviet Union's 1977 deployment of SS-20s, 171 of which were based east of the Urals (i.e., in the Asian

⁴ Eric Heginbotham, Michael S. Chase, Jacob Heim, Bonny Lin, Mark R. Cozad, Lyle J. Morris, Christopher P. Twomey, Forrest E. Morgan, Michael Nixon, Cristina L. Garafola, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1628-AF, 2017. As of April 04, 2019: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1628.html

⁵ J. Mohan Malik, “China and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Talks,” *Arms Control*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1989, pp. 235–275.

territory of the Soviet Union), was seen as a direct threat to China, and particularly to Beijing's nuclear deterrent, which was significantly smaller than it is today and far less survivable.⁶ China's nuclear force was entirely land-based and thus vulnerable to a counterforce first-strike from Soviet INF missiles (that is, missiles with a range prohibited by the INF).

China closely followed the INF negotiations when they were launched in the early 1980s and actively sought to influence U.S., Soviet, and Western European positions to suit its interests.⁷ Beijing was most intent that Washington keep its security interests in mind when dealing with Moscow. Indeed, as one analyst wrote at the time, "since the 1970s, the Chinese have relied on the United States to protect their interests in Soviet-American nuclear arms talks. At the same time, however, they have been apprehensive that Washington might make concessions to Moscow that damaged China's security."⁸

Based on public commentary and official statements, Beijing had two significant equities in the INF talks. First, it pushed for exclusion of the British and French arsenals from the INF treaty, so as to avoid any precedent that would imply that its own arsenal could be the subject of arms control talks. Second, and most importantly, it sought to ensure that the U.S.-Soviet agreements addressed Soviet INF deployments east of the Urals. In other words, it sought to preclude an agreement that dealt exclusively with the European theater.⁹

The possibility of addressing the European and Asian theaters separately came up at several points during the INF talks. When negotiations began, it was not at all clear that the eventual agreement would extend east of the Urals. For example, when the Soviets proposed in 1982 to institute a moratorium on deployments of SS-20s, the offer would have covered only Soviet territory west of the Urals. Unsurprisingly, Beijing, along with Tokyo and Seoul, pushed Washington to reject these calls.¹⁰ The United States eventually adopted the position that "Soviet Asian-based SS-20s must be a part of any U.S.-Soviet agreement."¹¹ As the talks progressed in the mid-1980s, the issue of INF missiles in Asia became a central stumbling block. According to President Ronald Reagan's arms control envoy, "One of the most stubborn points of Soviet intransigence concerned reductions or eliminations of its Asian-based [INF] missiles. Even as they had been willing to allow significant [reductions] in Europe, the Soviets remained profoundly reluctant to agree to any reductions in their Asian forces."¹² At the Reykjavik summit in 1986, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and Reagan agreed in principal to the "zero option" for Europe and a cap of 100 INF warheads in Soviet Asia and the United States. Those talks did not result in a final agreement due to differences over missile defense. As INF talks progressed in 1987, U.S. officials came to believe that the zero option for Europe and the

⁶ Michael J. Mazarr, "'A Very Good Thing': The INF Treaty and Asian-Pacific Security," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1988, pp. 248–256; and Heginbotham et al., 2017. At the time, Beijing largely relied on silo-based missiles.

⁷ Malik, 1989.

⁸ Bonnie S. Glaser, "Arms Control in Northeast Asia," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1988, pp. 164–180.

⁹ Malik, 1989.

¹⁰ Malik, 1989.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, "Arms Control: The East Asian and Pacific Focus," *Current Policy no.* 904, 1987.

¹² U.S. Department of State, 1987.

100-warhead cap for Asia might be the most the Soviets would be willing to give to get a deal. The Chinese vigorously objected to such an outcome, pushing both sides to reconsider. When Gorbachev announced the Soviet agreement to the global zero option (i.e., elimination of INF missiles in Europe and Asia) in July 1987, it was seen as a major diplomatic coup by the Chinese.¹³

In the end, the global zero option embodied in the INF led to the destruction of the 171 Soviet SS-20 missiles that had been stationed in Asia, as well as the elimination of the SS-12/22 (900-km range) and SS-23 (500-km range) Soviet systems.¹⁴ (The United States, by contrast, had no INF-banned missiles in the Pacific). In short, the INF essentially eliminated the nonstrategic Soviet missile threat to China, and specifically to China's nuclear arsenal; at the time, the Soviets also did not have any air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) or sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) systems to compensate. China was thus quite happy with the INF.

Current Chinese Views on the INF and Its Demise

From the signing of the INF until its effective collapse in recent months, China was a factor only in the context of attempts to universalize the treaty. At various stages, both Washington and Moscow, including at times jointly, proposed making the INF a global pact.¹⁵ Russian President Vladimir Putin has often cited Moscow's neighbors' possession of INF missiles as a major drawback in the treaty regime for Russia.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, given China's reliance on such missiles for the majority of its missile inventory, Beijing has been cool on this approach.¹⁷ As the staff of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission has noted, "Both the nuclear and conventional missiles in China's inventory that would be subject to INF Treaty restrictions are foundational to Beijing's overall military strategy—namely, to hold U.S. forces at risk should they choose to intervene in a regional conflict."¹⁸

Since the U.S. announcement of its intention to withdraw from the INF, China's official position has been clear: Beijing called for Washington to reconsider its decision and to stay in the treaty regime, citing the INF's "great significance in improving relations between major

¹³ Malik, 1989.

¹⁴ Mazarr, 1988.

¹⁵ See "Joint U.S.-Russian Statement on the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles at the 62nd Session of the UN General Assembly," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, October 25, 2007. As of March 21, 2019: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/oct/94141.htm>

¹⁶ See, for example, Putin's remarks at the 2016 Valdai Conference at President of Russia, "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," October 27, 2016. As of March 21, 2019: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53151>

¹⁷ "China Rebuffs Germany's Call for U.S. Missile Deal with Russia," Reuters, February 17, 2019; and U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center, *2017 Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat Report*, June 30, 2017, pp. 3, 7.

¹⁸ Jacob Stokes, *China's Missile Program and U.S. Withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 4, 2019, p. 3. As of March 21, 2019: https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20and%20INF_0.pdf

powers, strengthening international and regional peace, and maintaining global strategic balance and stability.”¹⁹

Given China’s approach to the original INF negotiations, it is plausible that there are some significant concerns in Beijing about the treaty’s demise, or more specifically the implications of its demise for the U.S. and Russian force postures (both nuclear and conventional) in Asia. Clearly, these concerns first and foremost relate to potential U.S. plans to deploy INF missiles to the Asia-Pacific theater. China has benefited from the INF because the treaty prevented the United States from deploying intermediate-range ground-based systems while China was able to develop its own conventional capabilities. But the reappearance of Russian INF missiles east of the Urals would also be a headache for Chinese planners. Given the relatively modest size of Beijing’s arsenal, the capability of any potential adversary to strike launch sites or C2 nodes deep within Chinese territory would be an unwelcome development.

However, several key developments since the 1980s make the potential reemergence of Russian INF missiles less threatening today than it was then. First and most importantly, the political-military relationship between Moscow and Beijing has dramatically improved. With agreed borders, mutual border-area troop reductions, and extensive strategic cooperation, Russia-China relations have undergone a radical transformation compared with the period of the original INF talks. Second, Beijing’s nuclear forces have become much more survivable, with more-mobile missiles and the introduction of submarine-launched ballistic missiles.²⁰ Third, Russia, unlike the Soviet Union, now fields ALCMs and SLCMs, making the reintroduction of GLCMs less of a potential military-strategic game-changer.

That said, whereas the United States would not adjust its nuclear posture because of increases in the UK or French nuclear arsenals, the same cannot be said of Russia and China. The nature of their strategic relationship is such that, in its contingency planning, China will take into account changes in Russia’s posture. Although relations are close today, both sides hedge regarding future developments.

Potential Implications of the INF’s Demise for Russia-China Relations

The impact of the demise of the INF on Russia-China relations will depend on future U.S. and Russian decisions on the development and deployment of INF missiles and on the broader dynamics in great-power relations.²¹ Currently, U.S. relations with both Russia and China are highly contentious, with shared expectations of continued—and perhaps intensified—future tensions. Meanwhile, Russia-China ties are closer and more constructive than they have ever been in the modern era; Beijing and Moscow also share the view that the United States represents the most significant threat to them both. The state of these relationships will be the prism through which any potential future INF missile deployments will be viewed.

¹⁹ “China Urges U.S. Not to Withdraw from Nuclear Treaty with Russia,” Reuters, February 2, 2019.

²⁰ Heginbotham et al., 2017.

²¹ I focus exclusively on the impact on Russia-China relations rather than the overall regional impact of the INF’s demise.

Russia has publicly stated that it will not deploy any future INF missiles in a particular regional theater unless the United States does so first.²² (One should interpret that statement to exclude the SSC-8, the Russian missile system that the United States believes to be inconsistent with the INF, which is already deployed and which Russia continues to insist is not subject to the treaty's provisions). If the United States follows through on its plans to deploy ground-based missiles in the Asia-Pacific and Russia responds in kind, China is likely to be more concerned with these U.S. missiles than with any Russian retaliatory deployments, assuming relations between the countries are broadly similar to what they are today. If the current cooperative climate of Russia-China relations persists, there are consultative mechanisms in place that could allow Moscow and Beijing to avoid public friction over such deployments and to mitigate substantive concerns behind the scenes. If Russia were not to follow through on its pledge and instead deploy INF missiles (including to Asia) without a first U.S. move and without prior consultation with Beijing, relations could deteriorate. However, such a development seems highly unlikely.

More broadly, given the potential challenges to China arising from post-INF U.S. missile deployments to the Asia-Pacific, one can hypothesize that some in Beijing might be displeased with Russia's role in the INF's downfall. Even if the Chinese might empathize with Moscow's view that it is merely responding to perceived U.S. aggressive moves, they certainly would have preferred for Russia to have made the necessary concessions to keep the United States in the INF regime and thus constrained in its Asia-Pacific force posture. Moscow's pursuit of its interests in this context is understandable to Beijing, but the problems it creates for China are real. An apt analogy is the Chinese attitude toward Russia's annexation of Crimea. Beijing did not publicly criticize the Russian move, but it did not applaud it either, because the precedent of separatism and national self-determination is a problem for China in the context of Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

One can also imagine potential future U.S.-Russia post-INF talks that catalyze a situation similar to the trilateral dynamics of the INF negotiations. Indeed, Russian officials have hinted at openness to considering a proposed mutual commitment not to deploy INF systems in Europe.²³ The feasibility of such an agreement, of course, is dubious in light of U.S.-Russia differences regarding the SSC-8. However, if it were possible to come to a bilateral agreement banning INF missiles in Europe, China certainly would not be pleased, because that would leave no restrictions on future U.S. (or Russian) deployments in Asia. Pursuing such an agreement covering Europe might thus serve U.S. interests in avoiding a repeat of the Euromissile crisis while also exposing potential Russia-China fissures. However, U.S. allies in Asia, particularly Japan, might be equally disconcerted by such an agreement.

No matter what transpires with future INF missile deployments, Moscow will seek to avoid any significant increase in China's nuclear warhead numbers. Russia's qualitative and

²² See Putin's comments in his meeting with the Foreign and Defense ministers on the INF withdrawal, President of Russia, "Vstrecha s Sergeem Lavrovym i Sergeem Shoigu" ["Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu"], February 2, 2019. As of March 21, 2019: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59763>

²³ See interview with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in Elena Chernenko, "SShA dlya sebya uzhe vse reshili'," *Kommersant*, December 19, 2018.

quantitative nuclear predominance over China is seen as a strategic necessity in Moscow, particularly given China's growing conventional military advantages.²⁴ If U.S. INF missile deployments in Asia catalyze a Chinese missile buildup in the region, there could thus be additional strain on the Russia-China relationship. But both sides would likely concentrate their ire on Washington.

Russia and China do appear to have different positions regarding the future of strategic arms control. Russian officials have repeatedly stated that any future reductions of strategic weapons would have to be multilateral, including the United Kingdom, France, and China. Chinese officials have stated that the United States and Russia would have to make much deeper cuts before China is prepared to join the process. The Barack Obama administration's implicit position, as evinced by the 2013 U.S. proposal to reduce U.S.- and Russian-deployed strategic warheads by one-third below New START levels, was similar to the Chinese view; the proposal suggested that further bilateral cuts were warranted before "multilateralizing" the process. (Russia rebuffed that U.S. proposal). The current U.S. position on this issue is unclear. The Donald Trump administration continues to review the question of New START extension and has not publicly demonstrated any interest in further nuclear reductions. In principle, however, a push for multilateral talks on further reductions could highlight latent differences between Russia and China on this matter.

Several first-order policy decisions are currently hanging in the balance: what INF missile systems the United States will develop; where it will seek to deploy them; what negotiated restrictions it might be willing to accept on INF missile systems, if any; and what its future plans are for strategic arms control. Once decisions have been made on these matters, Congress could push for an implementation plan that reflects the U.S. strategic interest in avoiding a Russia-China condominium. However, the broader context of relations will be a key factor: If current circumstances, whereby Russia-China relations are relatively close and U.S. relations with both are increasingly tense, persist, Washington will have limited leverage to exploit differences between Moscow and Beijing on this issue to advance U.S. interests and those of U.S. allies and partners.

²⁴ Jacob Kipp, *Asia Drivers of Russian Nuclear Force Structure*, Washington, D.C.: Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, 2010.