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Good Riddance to the INF Treaty
Washington Shouldn't Tie Its Own Hands in Asia
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In early August, the United States formally withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, a landmark 1987 arms control accord with Russia. Just two weeks later, on a small island off the Californian coast, the Pentagon tested a land-based missile once banned under the agreement. The demise of the INF Treaty is now official, on paper as on the ground.

The treaty's collapse was a long time coming. An agreement cannot work if only one party honors it, and the INF Treaty's sole cosignatory, Moscow, had been flouting its rules for years. During his presidency, Barack Obama considered withdrawing from the INF for precisely the same reason that helped drive President Donald Trump's decision. Still, to many observers, the decision to ditch the treaty is misguided and dangerous [2]. The Trump administration, they argue [3], is dismantling guardrails that were erected to keep tensions from escalating into a destabilizing arms race. At a time when several elements of the global arms control architecture are fraying, this latest casualty could only make matters worse.

But that line of criticism misses the point. If unilateral U.S. adherence to the treaty was futile in the face of repeated Russian transgressions, it had become outright dangerous in the face of a much more potent adversary—China. During the INF Treaty's 32-year lifespan, China developed the world's foremost conventional missile force [4], brimming with the very weapons that the treaty prohibited the United States from developing: ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers.

Today, China uses that missile arsenal to threaten the United States and its allies and partners throughout East Asia. Exiting the INF Treaty is no panacea, but it opens much-needed possibilities for Washington to reset the military balance with Beijing in its favor. Washington should use this opportunity to develop and deploy its own missiles to counter the Chinese threat—or risk being steamrolled in a future confrontation.

CHINA PULLS AHEAD

The INF Treaty, with its narrow focus on the United States and Russia, always acted as a straightjacket for U.S. strategy in Asia. In theory, the United States could have pushed for China to join the treaty—but China wouldn't, and it still won't. Beijing derives great benefit from its large land-based missile force and has made clear that it won't accede to any substantive arms control agreements for the foreseeable future. At an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council on August 22, for instance, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, enjoined ^[5] Washington to “exercise restraint and earnestly preserve the existing arms control regime” while insisting that China's own missiles pose “no threat to any country.”

Over the last three decades, China has made meteoric military progress by pursuing technologies that place opponents on the wrong side of physics. Ballistic missiles, which travel at multiple times the speed of sound and are therefore extremely difficult to intercept, have been the cornerstone of that effort. China can develop and deploy these weapons far more cheaply and effectively than the United States can defend against them, making any future conflict with China an extremely expensive and risky undertaking. All in all, Beijing “controls the largest and most diverse missile force in the world, with an inventory of more than 2,000 ballistic and cruise missiles,” Admiral Harry Harris, then the commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, testified ^[6] in 2017. According to Harris, some 95 percent of those missiles would have been prohibited by the INF Treaty, had China been a signatory.

Beijing has benefitted from other forms of American myopia as well. Arms control debates tend to focus on nuclear weapons, of which China has far fewer than Russia or the United States. But China's inventory of conventional missiles exceeds its nuclear inventory by a ratio of at least 7:1 ^[7]. Earlier this summer, Beijing fired six anti-ship ballistic missiles into contested waters in the South China Sea, a signal of assertiveness ^[8] to its neighbors, Washington, and the world at large. It now fields several dozen such “carrier killer” missiles, named for their potential ability to destroy warships or aircraft carriers far from Chinese shores.

The vast majority of China's missiles are land-based, rather than deployed on aircraft, ships, or submarines. That spells additional trouble for the United States. Large missiles of the type covered by the INF are substantially easier and cheaper to develop and operate on land than at sea or in the skies. They are also difficult to find and neutralize prior to their launch. This was true of Saddam Hussein's Scud missiles during the first Gulf War, which the U.S. military struggled to locate even in exposed desert; it is even truer of China's arsenal of cruise and ballistic missiles, which is hidden in varied terrains and extensive underground facilities, and made even more elusive by road-mobile launchers and a network of secure fiber optic cables built to ensure communication with the launch brigades.

Aside from its disruptive cybertechnologies, China's missile-centric military buildup may be the single biggest factor eroding U.S. power and influence in Asia. In a moment of crisis, this destructive arsenal could embolden Beijing to pursue its oft-invoked “core interests”—including its disputed claim to sovereignty over Taiwan—by trying to establish a *fait accompli*, forcing Washington and its regional allies to cave before the fighting even begins. U.S. air bases and aircraft carriers are technologically sophisticated compared to China's, but they are vulnerable to Chinese missile forces. As a result, Washington should take a page out of Beijing's own post-Cold War playbook and build a deterrent based on land-based missiles. Luckily, the death of the INF Treaty offers the perfect opportunity to do so.

HOW TO CATCH UP

Unshackled from the INF Treaty, what can the United States do to level the playing field? To begin with, it can once again develop and test ground-launched medium- and intermediate-range missiles. Testing has begun [9] on a ground-launched variant of the *Tomahawk*, allowing deployment within approximately 18 months. A mobile, ground-launched intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) with a range of 3,000 to 4,000 kilometers will eventually follow but will likely take several years to develop, because unlike the *Tomahawk* the IRBM lacks a post-Cold War analog on which to base new missiles.

As these new missiles become available, the United States should deploy them in the Asia-Pacific. For now, the most realistic and promising location is the U.S. overseas territory of Guam. Other U.S. territories in the Pacific, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea are also potential locations. To be sure, small islands such as Guam have only limited concealing terrain, while foreign governments may face popular opposition to hosting U.S. missiles. But the winds of public opinion could shift quickly, especially if China's military capabilities and regional ambitions continue to expand. And if peacetime politics preclude a permanent deployment in these countries, the United States can still pursue agreements that would allow it to rapidly deploy missiles for a limited period in times of crisis. (The recent deployment of mobile artillery rocket systems to Australia [10] for extended exercises suggests that such cooperation can work.)

U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty doesn't close the door on future arms control initiatives. On the contrary, it puts new possibilities on the table: Russia remains free to work with the United States on nonproliferation, including in the emerging realms of hypersonic and undersea nuclear weapons, and on Moscow's uniquely hazardous nuclear-powered cruise missile program, none of which is currently governed by any agreement. For the time being at least, Chinese leaders remain vocally opposed [11] to any IRBM development by the United States but unwilling to make any concessions when it comes to their own, much bigger conventional stockpile. If the Chinese eventually come to the arms control negotiating table, it will be because Washington pursued new capabilities, not because it unilaterally tied its hands.

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[2] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-03-04/mourning-inf-treaty>

[3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-08-06/return-doomsday>

[4] <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2018/12/the-china-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-asbm-bookshelf/>

[5] <http://www.china-un.org/eng/hyyfy/t1691256.htm>

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