

US missile treaty withdrawal sparks global nuclear arms race

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A half-century after the Cuban Missile crisis that brought human civilization to within a hair's breadth of destruction, Washington is fueling a global nuclear standoff that is, if anything, even more dangerous.

Last month, the White House announced that the United States would leave the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which prohibits the deployment of land-based missiles with ranges of up to 5,000 miles.

Military strategists and think tanks have made clear that the Pentagon has plans to deploy short- and medium-range nuclear-capable missiles in Eastern Europe, as well as on islands off the Chinese coast. Earlier this month, the Pentagon said it has accelerated its plans to deploy weapons prohibited by the treaty, declaring it “will start those steps on the systems that they couldn't before.”

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia would retaliate proportionately “and asymmetrically” to any deployment of US missiles in Europe, making clear that it would target US launch facilities as well as “command centers,” including Washington and possibly European capitals.

Putin declared that if the United States deployed such missiles, they would be able to “reach Moscow in just 10–12 minutes,” a situation that would be “dangerous for Russia.”

Putin warned that the growing stand-off increasingly resembles the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The present situation has definite parallels to that event, which was triggered by the stationing of American Jupiter ballistic missiles in Turkey in 1961. In response, the Soviet Union stationed its own medium-range nuclear missiles in Cuba, just over 100 miles from the Florida Coast. Numerous participants have attested to the fact that nuclear war was narrowly averted.

US plans for deploying missiles in violation of the INF treaty are already well advanced. In his speech, Putin alleged that the US missile defense systems installed in Poland and Romania were fully capable of launching medium-range tomahawk missiles armed with a nuclear payload. While Washington's claims that Russia is operating in violation of the INF treaty remain largely unsubstantiated, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists backs Putin's claim, declaring that “publicly available information makes it clear that the US Aegis-based systems in Eastern Europe, if equipped with cruise missiles, would indeed violate the INF.”

It adds, “If the Aegis-based systems in Eastern Europe were supplied with American cruise missiles—either the existing Tomahawk or a new missile that Russia claims the United States has been developing—they would become fearsome offensive forces, staged on the frontiers of Russia. And there would be little way for Russia to know whether Aegis systems were loaded with missile defense interceptors or nuclear-armed cruise missiles.”

When pressed on whether the American “missile defense” sites were capable of firing nuclear cruise missiles, the Pentagon has responded in the negative, declaring that the facilities' software prevented them from doing so. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has called this “a false assertion that is incompatible with the engineering design of the system.”

To turn these facilities into launch platforms for cruise missiles would, in other words, require little more than a software update.

A “proportional” response by Russia in violation of the INF would entail placing ground-based missiles within a few hundred miles of the US border: a largely unfeasible project. Putin made clear that in response to any moves to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles,

Russia would be prepared to implement an “asymmetric” response: placing hypersonic missiles on ships and submarines within a few hundred miles of the US border.

“With speeds we are capable of, we can place our ships far away from the territorial waters or even the exclusive economic zone of a certain nation. They can be in neutral waters, far in the ocean,” Putin said. “Nobody can forbid naval ships and submarines to be there.”

In response to American plans to make Europe into a firing range for nuclear missiles, Russia is threatening to turn America’s Eastern Seaboard into a high-stakes skirmish line, in which submarines, ships and aircraft armed with nuclear missiles jostle for position just a few hundred miles from one of the most densely populated coastlines in the world.

And this will be just one theater of the multipolar nuclear dystopia imagined by the Trump White House, with a similar standoff going on every day in the seas off the Chinese coast.

To make matters worse, all of this will play out not with today’s ballistic weapons, but with hypersonic missiles traveling at 25 times the speed of sound, with a “decision window” of just two or three minutes to determine whether a detected missile launch is a test, a false alarm or a full-scale thermonuclear assault, massively raising the chances of a deadly miscalculation with billions of lives on the line.

This catastrophic state of affairs was set into motion with the dissolution of the USSR, out of which Putin himself emerged. Nearly three decades ago, the end of the USSR was greeted with a wave of triumphalism and the declaration that, with the global victory of “liberal democracy,” nuclear war had become a thing of the past. What followed, however, was not a “peace dividend,” but rather unending wars in Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria. Now, with the Pentagon’s doctrine of “strategic competition,” the US is preparing for a full-scale war against nuclear-armed “great powers” like Russia and China.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, the United States and NATO pushed their forces hundreds of miles to the east, to the very borders of Russia, intent on reducing the country to the status of a semi-colony.

In response, the Putin government, expressing the social interests of the Russian oligarchy, is pursuing a

bankrupt policy. Incapable of making any appeal to anti-war sentiment within the United States or globally, the Kremlin wavers between cowardice and wild adventurism. Putin makes fruitless appeals to his American “partners” to come to their senses, while at the same time making bellicose nuclear threats, such as his provocative announcement that Russia will target Washington with nuclear weapons.

The Trump administration is the most aggressive purveyor of the global nuclear arms race, but the process is universal. A recent report by the Munich Security Conference declares that “the role of nuclear weapons” is “growing.” It adds that beyond the US and Russia, all of the nine nuclear weapons states are adding to or upgrading their arsenals, apparently intent on gaining an edge “in a period of new uncertainty.” In Germany, which had previously eschewed the development of nuclear weapons, the demand within the ruling elite for an independent nuclear force is growing stronger every day.

For his part, Trump is continuing and intensifying the policies of his predecessor, Barack Obama, the candidate of “hope and change,” who launched a trillion-dollar nuclear modernization program to produce “low-yield,” “usable” nuclear weapons that have started to roll off the assembly lines this year.

The universality of the new global arms race makes clear that it is not the outcome of the political conjuncture of one or another country, but an expression of a universal process gripping the crisis-ridden capitalist system. All over the world, the ruling classes see in war, plunder and conquest, together with the promotion of nationalism and xenophobia, the means to divert outward intense internal class pressures, expressed in a growing strike movement by the international working class.

But this growing movement of the working class offers the means to oppose the homicidal war aims of the ruling elite through its mobilization on a socialist program to put an end to the capitalist system, the root cause of war, dictatorship and social inequality.



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