US scrapping of INF treaty heightens threat of nuclear war

Bill Van Auken
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Washington formally scrapped the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty Friday, bringing the world a major step closer to nuclear war.

The treaty, signed over 30 years ago by US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, banned a whole class of weapons that had placed the world on a hair trigger for a nuclear conflict. Both countries agreed to end all use and production of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,417 miles).

CNN reported that the Pentagon will test within weeks a new cruise missile designed for ranges previously banned by the INF accord. The US military has reportedly been working on the weapon for the last two years.

An unnamed US official told the television news network that Washington aims to deploy the weapon in areas of Europe where it could overpower Russian air defense systems and strike "the country's ports, military bases or critical infrastructure."

Short and medium-range surface-to-surface missiles, including the Pershing II and the MGM Lance, were deployed by the United States in Western Europe in the early 1980s, while the Soviet Union had deployed SS-20 mobile missile launchers in the western USSR. These weapons had the capability of striking most major cities in Western Europe and the Soviet Union within minutes. The threat of a nuclear conflict on the continent triggered mass demonstrations against the US missile deployment, particularly in West Germany.

The abrogation of the agreement is bound up with Washington's turn toward "great power conflict" with Russia and China, in which US imperialism is seeking to leverage its military power as a means of containing Russia and countering the economic rise of China and its challenge to US global hegemony.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued the formal announcement of the US repudiation of the treaty, placing the full blame for its demise on Russia, even though it was the US that ripped up the agreement. "Russia failed to return to full and verified compliance through the destruction of its noncompliant missile system," he said.

Moscow has repeatedly denied this claim, insisting that its SSC-8 ground-launched cruise missile, which Washington says is out of compliance with the treaty, is not in violation. While it has invited the US and other powers as well as foreign journalists to inspect the weapons system, Washington has rebuffed all appeals for negotiations, issuing ultimatums to Russia that it knows will not be accepted.

Russia, meanwhile, has insisted that the US is out of compliance with the accord, having deployed missile defense systems in Poland and Romania that are equipped with launchers identical to those used by US warships capable of firing medium-range Tomahawk cruise missiles. It has also charged that the US deployment of armed drones on the continent is a further violation of the accord.

The US government's determination to upend the treaty and its restrictions on the development of medium-range missiles is aimed not just at escalating its military siege against Russia, but more fundamentally at preparing for "great power" conflict with China.

In response to the US encirclement of China and the deployment of massive naval and air power in the Pacific region as part of the "pivot to Asia" begun under the Obama administration, Beijing, which is not a signatory of the INF treaty, developed its own medium-range missiles.

The Pentagon wants to answer this development by deploying offensive missile systems of its own in the region aimed at China's major cities. It is no accident that the termination of the treaty prohibiting such a deployment coincides with the sharp escalation of US trade war measures against China.

While the decision to abrogate the treaty was announced by the Trump administration last February, the formal repudiation of the accord provoked condemnations from both Moscow and Beijing.

"On the famous symbolic clock that shows the time left until nuclear conflict, we have unfortunately passed yet another minute towards midnight," Russian Deputy Foreign

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Minister Sergei Ryabkov said in an English-language interview with RT. He added that “even though President Trump is saying that there is no point in an arms race and investment in military equipment, this will continue.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said, “China opposes such actions,” adding, “We call on the United States to abide by its obligations.”

She went on to accuse Washington of seeking “superiority in strategic weaponry” and warning that this would “seriously affect stability and undermine the global balance of power,” threatening “security in many regions.”

While most Western European governments and NATO echoed Washington’s claims that Russia was responsible for the treaty’s demise, there were nonetheless expressions of concern. German Foreign Minister Maas stated that “With the end of the INF treaty, Europe is losing part of its security.” He added, “I am convinced that today we must again succeed in agreeing [to] rules on disarmament and arms control in order to prevent a new nuclear arms race.”

Belgian Foreign Minister Didier Reynders wrote on Twitter: “I regret the ending of the INF Treaty, which has served our security for over 30 years. Belgium reaffirms its commitment to nuclear arms control and disarmament and calls upon the US and Russia to conduct a constructive dialogue and agree on stabilizing measures.”

Belgium, along with the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Turkey, is one of the countries where US nuclear bombs are deployed.

None of Washington’s Western European allies have given any indication that they are prepared to accept the deployment of medium-range missiles on their territory. Moscow has made clear that any such missile installations would immediately become targets.

Behind the statements about the abrogation of the INF Treaty undermining Europe’s security lies a turn toward escalation by the major European powers, in particular Germany, of remilitarization independently of the US.

The ripping up of the INF Treaty is widely expected to be followed by the ending of the even more significant New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) agreement. If not renewed, New START will expire in 2021. The pact caps the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads by both Russia and the US to 1,550, and places similar limits on the two countries’ intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Trump has described the pact as “one of several bad deals negotiated by the Obama administration,” while his national security adviser, John Bolton, has been telling the media that it will likely not be renewed. This would mean no remaining treaties restricting the buildup toward nuclear war.

The Pentagon is openly preparing for such a conflict. A “joint doctrine” on nuclear operations briefly posted on the internet in mid-June states that “nuclear weapons could create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability." It continues: "Specifically, the use of nuclear weapons will fundamentally change the scope of a battle and develop situations that call for commanders to win.”

The Pentagon is working to develop an arsenal of “usable,” low-yield “tactical” nuclear weapons to be utilized to turn the tide of battle in confrontations with US imperialism’s “great power” rivals. The underlying and highly unlikely scenario is that such weapons could be used without provoking a full-scale nuclear exchange, putting an end to life on the planet.

The immense dangers posed by the Trump administration’s abrogation of the INF Treaty and the significant step closer to nuclear war provoked no response from Trump's ostensible political rival, the Democratic Party.

Having voted overwhelmingly in both the House and Senate for a record $738 billion US military budget, the Democrats are fully committed to the march toward a nuclear conflagration. Neither House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who negotiated the budget deal with the Trump White House, nor Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said anything about the scrapping of the INF treaty.

For his part, Democratic presidential front-runner Joe Biden tweeted that the US “must lead the free world.” This was accompanied by anti-Chinese comments. Similarly, Elizabeth Warren kept silent about the treaty’s abrogation while tweeting that the US had “to get tough on China”, while Bernie Sanders said nothing.

There is no antiwar faction within the US ruling establishment, nor any interest on the part of the Democrats or the corporate media in alerting the American people to the growing threat of a global nuclear conflagration. This threat can be answered only through the construction of a mass antiwar movement based on the unification of the international working class in the struggle against capitalism.

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