

RIP INF Treaty: Russia's Victory, America's Waterloo

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On March 1, 2018 the world learned of Russia's new weapons systems, said to be based on new physical principles. Addressing the Federal Assembly, Putin explained how they came to be: in 2002 the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. At the time, the Russians declared that they will be forced to respond, and were basically told "Do whatever you want."

And so they did, developing new weapons that no anti-ballistic missile system can ever hope to stop. The new Russian weapons include one that is already on combat duty (Kinzhal), one that is being readied for mass production (Avangard) and several that are currently being tested (Poseidon, Burevestnik, Peresvet, Sarmat). Their characteristics, briefly, are as follows:

- Kinzhal: a hypersonic air-launched cruise missile that flies at Mach 10 (7700 miles per hour) and can destroy both ground installations and ships.
- Avangard: a maneuverable hypersonic payload delivery system for intercontinental ballistic missiles that flies at better than Mach 20 (15300 miles per hour). It has a 740-mile range and can carry a nuclear charge of up to 300 kilotons.
- Poseidon: an autonomous nuclear-powered torpedo with unlimited range that can travel at a 3000-foot depth maintaining a little over 100 knots.
- Burevestnik: a nuclear-powered cruise missile that flies at around 270 miles per hour and can stay in the air for 24 hours, giving it a 6000-mile range.
- Peresvet: a mobile laser complex that can blind drones and satellites, knocking out space and aerial reconnaissance systems.
- Sarmat: a new heavy intercontinental missile that can fly arbitrary suborbital courses (such as over the South Pole) and strike arbitrary points anywhere on the planet. Because it does not follow a predictable ballistic trajectory it is impossible to intercept.

The initial Western reaction to this announcement was an eerie silence. A few people tried to convince anyone who would listen that this was all bluff and computer animation, and that these weapons systems did not really exist. (The animation was of rather low quality, one might add, probably because Russian military types couldn't possibly imagine that slick graphics, such as what the Americans waste their money on, would make Russia any safer.) But eventually the new weapons systems were demonstrated to work and US intelligence services confirmed their existence.

Forced to react, the Americans, with the EU in tow, tried to cause public relations scandals over some unrelated matter. Such attempts are repeated with some frequency. For instance, after the putsch in the Ukraine caused Crimea to go back to Russia there was the

avalanche of hysterical bad press about Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, which the Americans had shot down over Ukrainian territory with the help of Ukrainian military.

Similarly, after Putin's announcement of new weapons systems, there was an eruption of equally breathless hysterics over the alleged "Novichok" poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter. A couple of Russian tourists, if you recall, were accused of poisoning Skripal by smearing some toxic gas on the doorknob of his house some time after he left it never to return. Perhaps such antics made some people feel better, but opposing new, breakthrough weapons systems by generating fake news does not an adequate response make.

Say what you will about the Russian response to the US pulling out of the ABM treaty, but it was adequate. It was made necessary by two well-known facts. First, the US is known for dropping nuclear bombs on other countries (Hiroshima, Nagasaki). It did so not in self-defense but just to send a message to the USSR that resistance would be futile (a dumb move if there ever was one). Second, the US is known to have repeatedly planned to destroy the USSR using a nuclear first strike. It was prevented from carrying it out time and again, first by a shortage of nuclear weapons, then by the development of Soviet nuclear weapons, then by the development of Soviet ICBMs.

Ronald Reagan's "Star Wars" was an attempt to develop a system that would shoot down enough Soviet ICBMs to make a nuclear first strike on the USSR winnable. This work was terminated when Reagan and Gorbachev signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in December, 1987. But then when Bush Jr. pulled out of the ABM treaty in 2002 it was off to the races again. Last year Putin declared that Russia has won: the Americans can now rest assured that if they ever attack Russia the result will be their complete, guaranteed annihilation, and the Russians can rest secure in the knowledge that the US will never dare to attack them.

But that was just the prelude. The real victory happened on February 2, 2019. This day will be remembered as the day when the Russian Federation decisively defeated the United States in the battle for Eurasia—from Lisbon to Vladivostok and from Murmansk to Mumbai.

So, what did the Americans want, and what did they get instead? They wanted to renegotiate the INF treaty, revise some of the terms and expand it to include China. Announcing that the US is suspending the INF treaty, Trump said: "I hope we're able to get everybody in a big, beautiful room and do a new treaty that would be much better..." By "everybody" Trump probably meant the US, China and Russia.

Why the sudden need to include China? Because China has an entire arsenal of intermediate-range weapons with a range of 500-5500 (the ones outlawed by the INF treaty) pointed at American military bases throughout the region—in South Korea, Japan and Guam. The INF treaty made it impossible for the US to develop anything that could be deployed at these bases to point back at China.

Perhaps it was Trump's attempt to practice his New York real-estate mogul's "art of the deal" among nuclear superpowers, or perhaps it's because imperial hubris has rotted the brains of just about everyone in the US establishment, but the plan for renegotiating the INF treaty was about as stupid as can be imagined:

1. Accuse Russia of violating the INF treaty based on no evidence. Ignore

Russia's efforts to demonstrate that the accusation is false.

2. Announce pull-out of the INF treaty.

3. Wait a while, then announce that the INF treaty is important and essential. Condescendingly forgive Russia and offer to sign a new treaty, but demand that it include China.

4. Wait while Russia convinces China that it should do so.

5. Sign the new treaty in Trump's "big, beautiful room."

So, how did it actually go? Russia instantly announced that it is also pulling out of the INF treaty. Putin ordered foreign minister Lavrov to abstain from all negotiations with the Americans in this matter. He then ordered defense minister Shoigu to build land-based platforms for Russia's new air and ship-based missile systems—without increasing the defense budget. Putin added that these new land-based systems will only be deployed in response to the deployment of US-made intermediate-range weapons. Oh, and China announced that it is not interested in any such negotiations. Now Trump can have his "big, beautiful room" all to himself.

Why did this happen? Because of the INF treaty, for a long time Russia has had a giant gaping hole in its arsenal, specifically in the 500-5500 km range. It had air-launched X-101/102s, and eventually developed the Kalibr cruise missile, but it had rather few aircraft and ships—enough for defense, but not enough to guarantee that it could reliably destroy all of NATO. As a matter of Russia's national security, given the permanently belligerent stance of the US, it was necessary for NATO to know that in case of a military conflict with Russia it will be completely annihilated, and that no air defense system will ever help them avoid that fate.

If you look at a map, you will find that having weapons in the 500-5500 km range fixes this problem rather nicely. Draw a circle with a 5500 km radius around the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad; note that it encompasses every single NATO country, North Africa and Middle East. The INF treaty was not necessarily a good deal for Russia even when it was first signed (remember, Gorbachev, who signed it, was a traitor) but it became a stupendously bad deal as NATO started to expand east. But Russia couldn't pull out of it without triggering a confrontation, and it needed time to recover and rearm.

Already in 2004 Putin announced that "Russia needs a breakthrough in order to have a new generation of weapons and technology." At the time, Americans ignored him, thinking that Russia could fall apart at any moment and that they will be able to enjoy Russian oil, gas, nuclear fuel and other strategic commodities for free forever even as the Russians themselves go extinct. They thought that even if Russia tried to resist, it would be enough to bribe some traitors—like Gorbachev or Yeltsin—and all would be well again.

Fast-forward 15 years, and is that what we have? Russia has rebuilt and rearmed. Its export industries provide for a positive trade balance even in absence of oil and gas exports. It is building three major export pipelines at the same time—to Germany, Turkey and China. It is building nuclear generating capacity around the world and owns a lion's share of the world's nuclear industry. The US can no longer keep the lights on without Russian nuclear fuel imports. The US has no new weapons systems with which to counter Russia's rearmament. Yes, it talks about developing some, but all it has at this point are infinite money sinks and

lots of PowerPoint presentations. It no longer has the brains to do the work, or the time, or the money.

Part of Putin's orders upon pulling out of the INF treaty was to build land-based medium-range hypersonic missiles. That's a new twist: not only will it be impossible to intercept them, but they will reduce NATO's remaining time to live, should it ever attack Russia, from minutes to seconds. The new Poseidon nuclear-powered torpedo was mentioned too: even if an attack on Russia succeeds, it will be a Pyrrhic one, since subsequent 100-foot nuclear-triggered tsunamis will wipe clean both coasts of the United States for hundreds of miles inland, effectively reducing the entire country to slightly radioactive wasteland.

Not only has the US lost its ability to attack, it has also lost its ability to threaten. Its main means of projecting force around the world is its navy, and Poseidon reduces it to a useless, slow-moving pile of scrap steel. It would take just a handful of Poseidons quietly shadowing each US aircraft carrier group to zero out the strategic value of the US Navy no matter where in the world it is deployed.

Without the shackles of the INF treaty, Russia will be able to fully neutralize the already obsolete and useless NATO and to absorb all of Europe into its security sphere. European politicians are quite malleable and will soon learn to appreciate the fact that good relations with Russia and China are an asset while any dependence on the US, moving forward, is a huge liability. Many of them already understand which way the wind is blowing.

It won't be a difficult decision for Europe's leaders to make. On the one pan of the scale there is the prospect of a peaceful and prosperous Greater Eurasia, from Lisbon to Vladivostok and from Murmansk to Mumbai, safe under Russia's nuclear umbrella and tied together with China's One Belt One Road.

On the other pan of the scale there is a certain obscure former colony lost in the wilds of North America, imbued with an unshakeable faith in its own exceptionalism even as it grows ever weaker, more internally conflicted and more chaotic, but still dangerous, though mostly to itself, and run by a bloviating buffoon who can't tell the difference between a nuclear arms treaty and a real estate deal. It needs to be quietly and peacefully relegated to the outskirts of civilization, and then to the margins of history.

Trump should keep his own company in his "big, beautiful room," and avoid doing anything anything even more tragically stupid, while saner minds quietly negotiate the terms for an honorable capitulation. The only acceptable exit strategy for the US is to quietly and peacefully surrender its positions around the world, withdraw into its own geographic footprint and refrain from meddling in the affairs of Greater Eurasia.

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