

US Congress to Undermine US-Russia INF Treaty and Entire Existing Nuclear Arms Control Architecture

By [Andrei Akulov](#)

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The House and Senate are currently considering defense authorization legislation which, if passed into law, would start dismantling some of the bedrock agreements of US-Russian arms control – the 1987 [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#) (INF Treaty), as well as longstanding US-Russian arms control efforts. The treaty eliminated all ground-based nuclear and conventional missiles, as well as their launchers, with ranges of 500–1,000 kilometers (310–620 mi) (short-range) and 1,000–5,500 km (620–3,420 mi) (intermediate-range). Signed in December 1987 by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the INF deal is accredited with significantly reducing the threat of nuclear confrontation and accelerating the end of the Cold War.

The landmark deal for the first time eliminated an entire class of missiles in Europe and set up a new framework for verifying compliance. Russia and the US have recently exchanged accusations of breaching the treaty but there have been no substantive talks on the issue.

Both versions of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2018 require the development of medium-range missiles the INF Treaty bans. They authorize programs of development on a new US mobile ground-based cruise missile (GLCM) with a range of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers.

Politico [cites](#) the Office of Management and Budget, saying it “unhelpfully ties the Administration to a specific missile system, which would limit potential military response options”. Legal experts [are also criticizing](#) the legislation as congressional overreach, saying the Senate can only ratify treaties and the president alone can negotiate or pull out of them. The House has no role whatsoever in approving treaties, *Politico* notes.



Gorbachev and Reagan sign the INF Treaty
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The House version states that if Russia failed to comply with the INF terms within 15 months of the bill's enactment, the US would no longer be legally bound by the treaty as a matter of domestic law. A similar provision could be inserted into the Senate version of the bill.

Russia's alleged violations serve as a pretext for deploying shorter and intermediate range weapons to strike other countries, like North Korea. The US Army is believed to lack sufficient firepower in a large-scale conflict, such as [missiles that can hit targets hundreds of miles away](#). David Johnson, a military analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, [believes](#) that "the lack of long-range firepower in the Army [is] a problem that could haunt land forces in a war in Eastern Europe".

Army Deputy Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. John Murray [told lawmakers](#) about the need for a "long-range precision fires" program to develop a powerful new missile that can reach targets 499 kilometers out, or about 310 miles. The range has to stay below 500 kilometers to comply with the INF treaty. If it's not in force anymore, then the Army will get what it wants.

Mark Gunzinger of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) [thinks](#) that pulling out from the treaty is the right thing to do. He believes that future ground-based strike systems could help the US suppress Russia's advanced integrated air defense systems and freedom of action in the event of a conflict. The intermediate range missiles could help the American military gain more advantage over China and North Korea.

"Perhaps the time is right for a serious debate over the US withdrawing from the INF Treaty", Gunzinger says.

Michaela Dodge of the Heritage Foundation [affirms](#) that, the Treaty is no longer relevant, and the US should withdraw.

Launching a program to develop a new ground-based cruise missile would add to the fact that some missiles to be eliminated under the terms of the INF Treaty are used as targets for ballistic missile defense tests, while Aegis Ashore systems use the launching pads that can be used to fire medium range Tomahawks. The Senate version of the bill says the US has no intention to tear up the treaty but the need to [close the capability gap](#) opened by Russia is given as a reason for launching the program. The two things contradict each other. The sum of these factors make the US actually abandon the agreement while not leaving it officially.

The same thing applies to Iran. Formally, the United States has not torn up the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. At the same time, imposing sanctions on Tehran over its ballistic missile program makes the agreement deprived of any substance. No matter what pretext is used, the fact is that punitive measures against Iran are in place. It makes Iranians put into doubt the need to further comply with the JCPOA.

The US-Russian relations under ex-President Obama left much to be desired but the issue of violating the INF Treaty was not on the agenda. If the medium-range missile development program had been launched, the Congress would have been in violation of the international

agreement. It did not occur then, but it is happening now under President Trump.

This would put into doubt the reputation of the United States as a reliable partner. If one international agreement is breached by the Congress, any other treaty can be abrogated, too.

Other defense programs would suffer, with money directed to implement the program in violation of the INF. The defense budget already includes funding to develop a fleet of nuclear air-launched cruise missiles. The more, the better?

No European ally has given consent to have the weapon on its soil. Would Europeans agree to have nuclear weapons on their soil? It makes the [1983 protests](#) leap to memory.

The US will not benefit greatly if it withdraws from the treaty. It does not have an intermediate-range ballistic missile, and developing a new one will take time and effort. The bill does not mention intermediate ballistic capability anyway. Land-based cruise missiles would not tip the balance into US favor because they are too slow to effectively knock out critical infrastructure sites in a first unexpected strike. The US military need ballistic missiles with short flight times to decapitate the enemy but the Congress wants a cruise, not a ballistic, missile.

If Europe-based cruise missiles are fired, Russia will have enough time for a launch-upon-attack against those European states, which host the weapons, and the United States.

With the INF Treaty effective no more, Moscow will be free to deploy intermediate-range missiles without restriction. In theory, its Iskander-M systems could be armed with ballistic and cruise missiles with extended range, while the American military has nothing to respond with.

The House version has a provision that would prohibit the use of funds to extend New START until Russia complies with the INF treaty. But the conclusion, whoever makes it, about Russia's compliance can be biased or outright wrong. Signed into law, the bill would undermine the whole architecture of arms control. The New START and the INF are the only two treaties still in place. Without them, the way to uncontrolled arms race would be unhindered.

The Congress would exceed its authority. It actually forces the administration to abandon an international treaty. The Senate can ratify international treaties, not abrogate them. The House does not vote on them. Both versions of the bill encroach on the president's foreign policy prerogatives the same way the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act does.

The bill includes provisions to undermine the treaty while the opportunities offered by the Special Verification Commission (SVC) envisioned by the INF treaty are far from being exhausted. The parties could use the SVC venue to consider additional confidence-building measures and information exchanges that take into account technological and political developments that have occurred recently.

The bill wants the Open Skies Treaty that could be used for INF verification to be deprived of funds. The observation capabilities could be upgraded. The NATO-Russia Council could serve as another mechanism to address specific security concerns. A lot of things could be done to preserve arms control regime and [prevent its crisis](#). The world is facing the most serious and

comprehensive crisis in the fifty-year history of nuclear arms control with almost every channel of negotiation deadlocked and the entire system of existing arms control agreements in jeopardy. The US Congress appears to be adamant in its desire to make things even worse.

Andrei Akulov is a retired colonel and Moscow-based expert on international security issues.

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