

Russia's Superpower Status Teeters with INF Treaty (Op-ed)

The Kremlin can no longer tout its membership to an exclusive arms-control club.

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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John Bolton / Kremlin.ru

U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton got the royal treatment in Moscow this week with coverage of his visit dominating the nightly news. He certainly covered a lot of diplomatic ground in three days, holding lengthy meetings with key Russian policymakers including Security Council Chief Nikolai Patrushev, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and President Vladimir Putin himself, who, in a show of great respect, arrived to the meeting on time.

This flurry of meetings points to a restoration in some form or another of strategic dialogue

between Moscow and Washington covering issues including Syria, Ukraine, international terrorism, North Korea, nuclear arms control and cyber operations.

Going into the meetings, the United States and Russia had competing positions on almost of these key issues; the overall relationship was becoming increasingly adversarial by the day. It is not yet clear whether Bolton managed to bridge any of the most important differences, but several tangible deliverables from the meetings suggest some progress was made.

One is the decision to hold another summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and Putin in Paris on Nov. 11 during the WWI commemorations, possibly followed up by another meeting in late November at the G20 summit in Argentina. Putin sounded somewhat impatient for another one-on-one with Trump, perhaps because it is Russia's only viable channel of influencing U.S. policy. Another deliverable was the agreement to resume high-level consultations on terrorism and to expand the dialogue on Syria, as Russia wanted.

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However, Bolton's talks in Moscow were dominated by Trump's decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty. It was a decision that both relieved and rattled Moscow.

On one hand, Russia has long been uncomfortable with the INF Treaty. For Russia, the deal was heavily skewed in favor of the United States and NATO, because it indefinitely secured their basing advantage in sea- and air-launched cruise missiles, while restraining Moscow on ground-launched cruise missiles. Russia also found itself in a security environment where half a dozen neighboring countries, particularly China, were deploying IRBMs and GLCMs that could hold key Russian targets at risk.

Vladimir Putin and his former Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov [threatened](#) to withdraw from the INF Treaty in 2007 if the ban on such systems did not extend to other countries. But efforts to globalize the INF Treaty, promoted by Russia and the United States in 2008 fizzled out. Trump and Bolton now throw Putin's INF arguments of 2007 back at him, citing China's mid-range missiles as a reason to abandon the accord.

Since 2008, Moscow has been quietly working to find ways out of the INF Treaty, developing two and deploying one missile that exceeded the Treaty limits. Moscow refused to engage constructively on the violations when the Obama administration called it out in 2014 hoping either to trade them for restrictions on U.S. missile defense deployments in Europe or to quietly push Washington to be the first to back out of the agreement to absorb all the negative publicity.

In the not too distant future, Russia may take advantage of the moment by deploying mid-range GLCMs and possibly RS-26 "Rubezh" IRBM to offset NATO conventional precision strike advantages in Europe — at a lower cost and higher survivability than it would have been possible under the INF Treaty. Washington does not currently have mid-range missiles and would need several years to develop them, assuming Congress funds such programs.

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In the longer term, however, losing the INF will weaken Russia's status as a great power with special responsibility for international security on a par only with the United States. Another risk is that Bolton and company will use the death of the INF Treaty as justification for refusing to extend the Obama-era New START Treaty, despite Putin's diplomatic outreach in Helsinki.

Going forward, fears of a new nuclear arms race are overblown. This is not the 1980s. It is not preordained, at least not in Europe. A lot will depend on what Russia and the United States deploy, in what formats (nuclear or conventional) and in what geographic locations. Deployments of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles — new SS20s and Pershing-2s — in significant numbers would be highly destabilizing, given shorter warning times (if stationed in Poland), and at this juncture is unlikely. Deployments of non-nuclear slow-flying cruise missiles in modest numbers would not really change the status quo.

It is unclear whether the United States would be able to secure allied permission to station such forces in Europe. Most European allies except Britain and Poland are wholly unenthusiastic about an increase in deployments and would prefer the United States stay in the INF Treaty (they should have been more vocal about it earlier with Moscow).

Nor is it clear that the United States wants to deploy INF systems in Europe at all, as Bolton said in Moscow. It appears that the United States is focused mainly on China and North Korea to free up air and naval assets for other targeting options. Asia could be Russia's focus as well — it needs INF type weapons to deter China and free up its strategic forces to focus solely on deterring the United States. Bolton appeared to try to draw Russia into discussions on dealing with the Chinese missile threat, but the Kremlin demurred and is unlikely to do anything that might destroy its budding alliance with China.

Putin and Trump will have serious issues to discuss in Paris. But Trump may arrive embroiled in a new political reality should Democrats take control of the House on Nov. 6. The meeting will affect the substance of U.S. chemical weapons sanctions due on Nov. 22, with Bolton indicating a perfunctory approach.

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