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Moscow and Washington Are Heading Down a Very Risky Path

Russia and the United States are on the brink of a new arms race as future of vital arms control treaties in doubt.

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On Feb. 1, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced that the United States would suspend its obligations under the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and give notice of its intention to withdraw from that agreement in six months. The next day, President Vladimir Putin said Russia would also suspend its INF obligations. Moscow and Washington have decided to head down a risky path.

The primary cause of the treaty's demise is Russia's development and deployment of the 9M729, a prohibited land-based intermediate-range missile. The U.S. government for years called on Moscow to return to compliance but failed to adopt an effective political and military

strategy to achieve that. In the months since John Bolton became national security advisor, it does not appear that Washington tried. Mr. Bolton's open antipathy to arms control likely explains that.

Mr. Bolton's disdain for arms control and the INF Treaty appears to have found a partner in the Russian military, which has long chafed under the treaty's ban on land-based intermediate-range missiles. Aside from the 9M729, the Russian Defense Ministry is apparently developing two other intermediate-range missiles — a land-based version of the Kaliber sea-launched cruise missile and a hypersonic missile — as supposed responses to a U.S. intermediate-range missile.

Note that the U.S. missile has not been deployed or even tested. In fact, the Pentagon has yet to disclose whether it will be a cruise or ballistic missile.

This charade recalls the time at the INF negotiations in 1983 when the Soviet chief negotiator claimed that the Soviet SS-20 missile was a "response" to the U.S. Pershing II. Considering that the SS-20 was deployed in 1976, seven years before deployment of the Pershing II, the SS-20 as a response showed remarkable prescience on the part of Soviet military planners.

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With Moscow continuing its violation of the INF Treaty and Washington showing little interest in its preservation, it is all but certain the treaty will come to a formal end in six months.

That will leave just one treaty regulating U.S. and Russian nuclear forces: the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START, sometimes referred to in Russia as START III). In contrast to the INF Treaty, both sides met New START's limits when they took full effect in February 2018. Russian officials have complained that the U.S. military converted some U.S. systems so that they would not count under New START in an inappropriate manner, an issue that is being discussed in the treaty's channel for addressing compliance issues.

New START, however, expires by its terms in just two years. It can be extended by up to five years, and Russian officials have indicated an interest in extension.

Extending New START would be in the U.S. interest. Extension would cap Russian strategic forces to 2026 while not impacting U.S. modernization plans, since those plans are designed to fit within New START's limits (the same may be true of the Russian side, but the Russian military has not disclosed its planned future strategic force structure). Extension would also continue the flow of important information between the two sides provided by the treaty's data exchanges, notifications, inspections and other verification measures.

Extending New START should be an easy decision for Washington. Indeed, it would be an easy decision for most U.S. administrations. The administration of Donald Trump, however, is not most U.S. administrations.

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INF Treaty

The U.S. president himself has shown little understanding of nuclear arms control. He thoughtlessly dismissed New START as a bad deal done by his predecessor. We know Mr. Bolton's view; he once welcomed treaty violations as creating "the opportunity to discard obsolete, Cold War-era limits on [America's] own arsenal and to upgrade its military capabilities."

This poses a novel situation for the Kremlin. In the past, Soviet and Russian leaders usually could assume that their American counterparts were as — or often more — interested in arms control than they were in Moscow. Not so today.

This opens the disturbing prospect that the INF Treaty will die this summer while New START ends in February 2021. No constraints will then govern Russian or U.S. nuclear forces. Neither side should welcome that situation, which will be less stable, less predictable and less secure.

In the late 1960s, President Richard Nixon and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev recognized that piling up more and more strategic missiles did not improve either side's security. President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev came to a similar conclusion with regard to both intermediate-range missiles and strategic nuclear forces in the 1980s. Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev likewise saw the value in regulating nuclear arms nine years ago.

We can only hope that — before the two countries proceed too far down their current path and things get out of hand — such wisdom returns to the Kremlin and the White House.

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