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US Lawmakers Introduce Legislation to Unleash Nuclear Arms Race in Europe

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The INF Treaty was a major breakthrough to halt and reverse the Cold War-era nuclear arms race in Europe. There are growing signs that the treaty is in jeopardy. A possible US unilateral withdrawal and failure to resolve the compliance dispute could impede efforts to save the arms control regime from being eroded.

On February 16, Senator Tom Cotton (R-Arkansas), along with Senators Ron Johnson (R-Wisconsin) and Marco Rubio (R-Florida) introduced the Intermediate-Range Forces Treaty (INF) Preservation Act, legislation that would allow the United States to develop new intermediate-range missiles. Congressmen Ted Poe (R-Texas) and Mike Rogers (R-Alabama) introduced companion legislation in the House of Representatives.

The accusations of Russia violating the INF Treaty not backed up by any evidence were used as a pretext for introducing the measure. For instance, the *New York Times* has recently published report saying that Russia «has secretly deployed» a new nuclear-capable intermediate-range cruise missile, the SSC-8, in apparent violation of the 1987 treaty. «*This legislation will give President Trump the tools he needs to show our friends and adversaries alike that 'peace through strength' is back*», said Mike Rogers.

The INF Treaty is a key agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union which put a seal on the Cold War era. It eliminated all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with intermediate ranges, defined as between 500-5,500 kilometers (3000-3400 miles).

If the bill becomes a law, it won't add to US or NATO security. America has real interest in preserving the treaty in force. It has sound reasons for doing so. One of them is that US NATO allies greatly value the INF and want it to remain effective. A US withdrawal would raise concern on their part.

With no hard evidence of non-compliance produced, the US will be held responsible by international community for ending the treaty. If Washington possessed facts to substantiate the claim that Moscow is in violation of the treaty, it would have been provided them a long time ago.

The bill says the US is to 'develop» new systems. But even if a decision were taken to return obsolete Pershing-2s and long-range Tomahawks, it would take time and effort. On its part, Russia can easily increase the range of existing Iskander missiles.

Developing US new systems would impose a new burden on an already stretched defense budget. Funding an new expensive program would make draw funds from other accounts, such as new conventional weapons, the upgrade of strategic nuclear forces, the ballistic missile defense (BMD), you name it. Today, the US national debt is about \$20 trillion and the clock is ticking.

Even if the provision of the bill is carried out and a new intermediate range system is in place, the US will face a tall order in finding an ally willing to host it and become a target for a pre-emptive strike by Russian armed forces. Such deployments would be viewed as extremely provocative to Moscow.

Even in the 1980s it was a close thing. Those days the plans to deploy INF forces met fierce domestic political and public opposition. A controversial decision would tear NATO apart at the time the US and its European allies don't see eye to eye on many issues.

The same applies to deployment plans in the Pacific. Japan would worry about deteriorating the relationship with Russia and China. South Korea would fear such a deployment would might disrupt its improving relations with China.

The times have changed. Today, Russia possesses cutting edge S-400 air defense systems capable of countering not only ballistic but also cruise missiles with an operational range of 3,000–3,500 km (1,864-2,174 mi).

The Russian military is gearing up to test the first prototypes of its next-generation S-500 Prometey air and missile defense system. The weapon has no analogues in the world. S-500 is the fifth generation system capable of destroying intercontinental ballistic missiles and spacecraft, hypersonic cruise missiles and airplanes at speeds of higher than Mach 5. Its response time is only 3-4 seconds, just think about it! It can detect and simultaneously attack up to ten ballistic missile warheads out at 600 km flying at speeds of twenty-three thousand feet per second. The system can engage targets at altitudes of about 125 miles, including incoming ballistic missiles in space at ranges as great as 400 miles. Evidently, Russia has means to counter the threat. It puts into doubt the effectiveness of any future intermediate range weapon the US would develop in accordance with legislation in question.

The end of INF treaty would provoke other states into an arms race the US cannot control.

The bill is introduced at the time the world is facing the most serious and comprehensive crisis in the fifty-year history of nuclear arms control. Since pulling out from the 1972 ABM Treaty, the US has been taking one step after another to undermine the arms control regime that has served as a pillar of international security for dozens of years. Now the US Congress is on the brink of unleashing an arms race with dire consequences for America itself.

Does it all make sense? Russia has recently announced its goal to shift from nuclear to conventional deterrence to make the world safer.

The recent initiative Germany, supported by leading the leading European partners, provides a new chance to address the problems of European security. With so many controversial issues on the agenda, Helsinki-2 would be the right way to launch discussions on creating a security regime from Lisbon to Vladivostok – something Moscow proposed a few years ago.

There are opportunities to seize and turn the tide as arms control is unraveling. Instead, a group of US lawmakers has introduced a legislation to quash all hopes for a better world. Never before the arms control regime had been threatened so much. Voting for the bill means shooting yourself in the foot. The US will undermine its own security and create huge problems to overcome. Hopefully, there will be enough sober-minded members of Congress to prevent the measure from becoming a law.