



The Impact of the Abrogation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on the Strategic Situation in Northeast Asia

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The Korean Peninsula has embarked on a long journey towards a new era of peace. However, as Murphy's law dictates, anything that can go wrong will go wrong. On August 2, 2019, the United States announced that it would formally withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (hereafter "INF Treaty") that it signed together with Russia in 1987, citing Russian transgressions of the terms of the treaty. The announcement came exactly six months after US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's February 2, 2019 statement declaring the intention of the United States to withdraw from the treaty. Following the US withdrawal, the Russian government also withdrew from the treaty, saying "the INF Treaty, signed between the United States and the Soviet Union on December 8, 1987, has expired on this day due to the actions of the United States."

Reasons the United States Withdrew from the INF Treaty

There is no doubt that the withdrawal from the thirty-two-year old treaty will be recorded as a historic inflection point with enormous influence on the future of international security and international politics. In particular, unlike the past when the intermediate-range ballistic missile issue caused a stir in Europe, this time it seems as though it will also have a negative impact on peace in Northeast Asia and on the Korean Peninsula. The most worrisome concern is that the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty will not only accelerate strategic competition between the United States and China, but also intensify existing regional security dilemmas. While the justification for

the withdrawal was Russian actions, the true strategic intention of the US was to prevent China from expanding its influence in East Asia, and should be seen in the context of US-China strategic competition. The United States has not bothered concealing this intention. In August of 2011, National Security Advisor John Bolton, then Senior Researcher at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), wrote in the Wall Street Journal that in order to prevent China's strategic reinforcement of its intermediate range missiles, the INF Treaty must either be abrogated or China must be forced to become a member. Furthermore, in April of 2017, US Ambassador to the ROK Harry Harris, then-Commander of the United States Pacific Command, stated in a Congressional testimony that more than 90 percent of China's ballistic and cruise missiles would have been in violation of the INF Treaty, had China been a signatory.

In line with such American concerns, since 2010, China has strengthened its intermediate-range missile capability as part of its Anti-Access Area-Denial (A2AD) strategy to block US military access to the South China Sea. For example, China has a variety of ground-launched intermediate-range missiles, such as the DF-11 (600km), the DF-15 (800km), the DF-16 (1,500km), the DF-21 (1,700km), the DF-25 (4,000km), and cruise missiles like the CJ-10 (2,500km). China deployed its first anti-ship ballistic missile, the DF-21D, in 2013 to counter American aircraft carriers. The missile, dubbed "the carrier-killer," has a range of 1,800 to 3,000 kilometers, and due to the difficulty in intercepting it, is the most threatening weapon China has against the United States.

The US wants to Deploy INF to its Asian Allies

Because of the INF Treaty, the United States has been unable to test or deploy ground-launched missiles that can adequately counter China's increase of its intermediate-range missile capability. The US withdrawal from the INF treaty will thus be played as a card to place strategic pressure on China to sign a new INF treaty. If that is not feasible, the United States will make use of its Asian allies to deploy intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles targeting China. A recent press release quoted former White House WMD policy coordinator Gary Samore, saying that "one of the reasons for the withdrawal of the United States from the INF Treaty was China's absence as a signatory." Furthermore, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has said that he wants to deploy new precision-guided intermediate-range missiles in allied Asian countries. He made clear that "the deployment sites should be discussed with the allied countries in question, but the missiles will be

INF-range missiles.” Esper’s statement shows that the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty is not independent of China, but rather can also be interpreted as a way to indirectly examine the reaction of US allies. However, when the United States aims its missiles at China, the strategic implications of that missile deployment for Guam and other US allies in the region will be fundamentally different compared to the strategic implications of intermediate-range missile deployment in Europe in the 1980s. This is a serious issue.

The Difference between the European and the Northeast Asian INF Dispute

It is well-known that the intermediate-range missile dispute in Cold War-era European security, which both amplified the danger of nuclear war but also brought about its end, occurred in the context of a strategic nuclear weapons equilibrium where both the United States and the Soviet Union maintained the ability to launch an attack on each other’s mainland. Thus, the United States and the Soviet Union could manage the risks of intermediate-range nuclear missiles, resulting in the December 1987 INF Treaty that brought about the end of the Cold War. However, with regard to the development of the intermediate-range nuclear missile dispute in East Asia after the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty, the capability of China to strike the US mainland is disproportionate to the US capability to strike China. The United States can deploy ground-launched intermediate-range nuclear missiles in allied countries, targeting the Chinese mainland. The United States and China will therefore understand and respond to the regional-level INF dispute in East Asia in different ways. Due to this difference, the effect of the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty — and the effect of the new intermediate-range missiles that the United States subsequently will test and deploy — on the situation in East Asia, cannot be compared with the previous situation in Europe. The strategic implications are multidimensional and multilayered.

China's Strategic Nuclear Buildup and the Possibility of a Sino-Russian Alliance

China, which in absolute terms is inferior to the United States in terms of strategic nuclear weapons, will take two strategic responses to American intermediate-range missile deployment. First, China will increase its capability to strike the US mainland by increasing its arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons. Through this measure, China can attempt to even out the strategic

imbalance between itself and the United States. Second, China may form a de facto security alliance with Russia, which likely has the same strategic nuclear capabilities as the United States. In this way, China can use strategic Russian assets to offset the strategic imbalance. Whichever response China chooses, the new regional INF dispute in East Asia will initiate an arms race and will be the first step in forcing a new type of arms race on major countries in the region.

The Eruption of a Periodic Alliance Dilemma due to Strategic Dissonance

The second strategic implication of the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty is that it will create an alliance dilemma. In other words, there will be periodic security conflicts stemming from the “strategic dissonance” which arises due to an inability to reach a compromise between the United States and its Asian allies (Korea, Japan, and Australia) over the new deployment of INF. This is because intermediate-range missiles deployed in these countries have no other target than the Chinese mainland. US Secretary of Defense Esper’s remarks that “the deployment sites should be discussed with the allied countries in question” raised particular concerns about the deployment of missiles in Darwin, on the North Coast of US ally Australia, 5,000km away from Shanghai, China. Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Marise Payne responded in a very general, yet careful way, stating that “We see China as an important partner of Australia...we will work with the United States, our strongest ally, and our core partner, China, to pursue stability, security and prosperity.” In other words, the United States will encounter some difficulties in coordinating this new strategic initiative with its allies to deploy intermediate-range missiles in their respective territories because it is aimed at mainland China. For America’s Asian allies, the deployment of intermediate-range missiles aimed at mainland China will not enhance cooperation or strengthen ties between them and the United States. However, it does have the potential to cause serious harm to their national security interests.

Negative Aftermath in US-DPRK Denuclearization Process

The US withdrawal from the INF treaty is likely to negatively impact the denuclearization process on the Korean Peninsula. After the second US-DPRK summit in Hanoi in 2019, the denuclearization process has been on hold pending further negotiations, which will likely proceed

after the conclusion of US-ROK military exercises. However, even if Chairman Kim and President Trump are able to establish a modicum of trust and hold a third summit which results in clear progress towards a denuclearization agreement, the introduction of INF in the region will alter the calculus of North Korean denuclearization and make it more difficult to persuade Kim Jong Un to give up his short and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Given the new regional INF dispute, it is likely that North Korea will either exempt short- and intermediate range missiles such as Scuds, Nodong, and Musudan (Hwasong-10) from the denuclearization process altogether or will simply take a very passive stance with regards to their disposal. In other words, even if North Korea agrees to cooperate with the United States and dispose of its Hwasong-15 and other intercontinental missiles as part of the denuclearization process, it is still likely that the regime will oppose the removal of short- and intermediate range missiles that could threaten US allies in the region. This in turn can highlight the alliance dilemma between the United States and its allies in the denuclearization process, because even though North Korea's short- and intermediate range missiles do not constitute a direct threat towards the United States, they do pose an existential threat to South Korea, Japan, and other US allies in the region.

On the other hand, if the new regional INF dispute in Northeast Asia is mishandled, the possibility that the United States will use it to exert military pressure against North Korea to induce its denuclearization cannot be ruled out. If the future US-DPRK denuclearization process ends up in a win-win scenario for both the United States and North Korea, the INF dispute may not become an issue. However, if the denuclearization process faces another deadlock, or if the United States and North Korea have different opinions about the speed at which the process should be undertaken, the INF dispute may easily transform into a coercion strategy against North Korea and be used as a military sanction on top of economic sanctions. We must also consider the possibility that the US-DPRK denuclearization process becomes linked to the US presidential election process, in which case the Trump administration may use the INF issue to obtain visible denuclearization outcomes from North Korea. In addition, if North Korea conducts a medium-to-long-range missile test as a ploy to gain the upper hand in the denuclearization process, the United States could deploy INFs to its allies as a countermeasure. Of course, such a situation would be a departure from the ongoing dialogue-based denuclearization process of the Korean Peninsula and would signal a return to the traditional confrontational dynamic which has characterized US-DPRK relations thus far.

The last few years of US and Russian security policies have ultimately led to the abolition of the INF Treaty, which raises concerns that the fate of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) will also be compromised. The INF dispute in Northeast Asia comes at a time when US-

China strategic competition is intensifying across East Asia, and it is expected to exacerbate the situation. Even so, the expansion of the US-China conflict resulting from the INF dispute should not be allowed to interfere with the denuclearization process of the Korean Peninsula.

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