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## The 'New' Nuclear Arms Race

*By Rajesh Basrur*

### Synopsis

*Expectations of a renewed nuclear arms race if the US abandons the INF Treaty are misplaced. The new arms race is already under way.*

### Commentary

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S assertion that the United States will withdraw from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia has set off a flurry of speculation about the potential consequences. Most commentators agree that this will likely set off another round of arms racing reminiscent of the Cold War. But this is superfluous reasoning. A fast-paced arms race is *already* under way with all the nuclear players involved in varying degrees.

Amidst the euphoria of the Cold War's end, it seemed universal nuclear disarmament was a reachable target in the long term. President Barrack Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 for his "vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons". But optimism soon faded. The Nobel Committee had hoped the prize would strengthen his hands, but as its Secretary, Geir Lundestad, admitted later, "the committee didn't achieve what it had hoped for". Indeed, current American nuclear modernisation plans were initiated by the Obama administration and are expected to cost some US\$1.3 trillion over the next three decades.

### Slowdown, For A While

To be sure, there was reason for hope: the end of the Cold War saw global warhead numbers (mostly US and Russian) reduced sharply from a peak of 64,449 in 1986 to 11,635 in 2009. But the decline slowed down thereafter. Formal stockpile numbers, moreover, did not include warheads in storage, which can be quickly dusted off for deployment.

The reductions achieved by the big two retained their multiple overkill capacity. Today, US and Russian warheads (including stored bombs) number 13,400. Meanwhile, nuclear 'modernisation' is gathering pace. The more advanced powers are developing high-tech weapons systems that threaten notions of deterrence stability drawn from the Cold War era.

The INF Treaty banned land-based intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometres that were considered destabilising because they were fast and accurate. West Germany-based American Pershing-IIs could hit Moscow in six minutes, leaving little reaction time in the event of false alarms, which occurred frequently. The same problem applied to Soviet SS-20s.

### **INF Treaty Obsolete?**

Today's unregulated hypersonic vehicles can reach similar or higher speeds – current tests are reported at around Mach 5 and over (as compared to the Pershing II's Mach 8), but NASA has already gone well beyond to 9.6 Mach with its X-43A hypersonic vehicle. The US, Russia, Japan and China are feverishly developing hypersonic weapons. India already possesses the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, which is capable of reaching Mach 3, and has test facilities for hypersonic vehicles that could attain much higher speeds.

In short, the INF Treaty is already becoming obsolete and the risk of accidental war is rising even as tensions between the US and Russia and between the US and China are growing, while India-China and India-Pakistan frictions along disputed borders have been even more troubling.

In tandem with hypersonic vehicles, other developments are generating similar tensions. The US has on the anvil new weapons systems such as the strategic long-range cannon (with a range of over 1,600 km), the B-21 long-range strategic bomber, a new generation of ground-based ballistic missiles, and the Long-Range Standoff Cruise Missile (LRSO).

Russia is developing its own range of nuclear or dual-capable weapons: the 'Satan-6' autonomous underwater vehicle, the upgraded Tupolev Tu-22M3M supersonic intermediate-range bomber, and the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). China, similarly, is accelerating nuclear weapons development with the DF-21 intermediate-range ballistic missile, the long-range DF-41 ICBM, the 'Type-096' nuclear submarine, and the Hong-20 long-range strategic bomber.

### **Arms Racing: Cascading Phenomenon**

To complicate matters further, arms racing is a cascading phenomenon. When China competes with the US, it arouses insecurity and a competitive drive in India, which in turn does the same in Pakistan. Thus, to make up for the apparent imbalance in their forces, Beijing has responded to the US force 'advantage' by deploying multiple-warhead (MIRVed) missiles. India has reacted by doing the same; and Pakistan has in turn responded likewise.

The irony beneath these developments is that, notwithstanding this high-tech racing, the actual dynamics of nuclear confrontation are elementary: regardless of the nuclear “balance” at any given time, no one wants to fire the first shot because even a small possibility of a single nuclear bomb dropped on one’s own territory or forces is unacceptable and, moreover, could set in motion an unpredictable chain of events with unimaginable consequences.

That is why the US did not try to preempt China’s fledgling capabilities in the early 1960s; why the Soviet Union refrained from using nuclear weapons during months of border fighting with China in 1969; and why Kim Jong Un’s North Korea remains unscathed by US military power today.

### **So What’s The Point Of The Nuclear Race?**

What then is the real function of nuclear arms racing if it does not generate true balancing? First, a ‘robust’ response creates a primarily symbolic feel-good self-image among political and military leaderships that have inherited millennia of balancing proclivities. Some of it appears to border on the absurd: my weapons are bigger and better than yours (recall President Trump’s tweet vis-à-vis North Korea to this effect last January). But it goes deeper.

To borrow a term from the scholar Benjamin Miller, a balancing response among nuclear competitors stems from a ‘thought style’ that is deeply embedded in the psyche of strategic elites, a way of thinking honed by a long history of pre-nuclear warfare. Second, political leaders who engage in nuclear competition are invariably addressing domestic audiences to ensure their continuing political support.

They want to show resolve by not backing down, by demonstrating their readiness to respond proactively to threats. Not unexpectedly, Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, responded to Trump’s assertion that ‘you can’t play that game with me’ by asserting that Russia would act ‘to restore balance in this sphere,’ a typical rhetorical exchange representing the symbolic game that nuclear powers play.

The future is predictable. Fuelled by strategic tensions, the new arms race will continue unabated; somewhere down the road, a crisis will occur; negotiations will commence; and competing powers will try and attain a stable equilibrium.

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