

# Russia has deployed a banned nuclear missile. Now the U.S. threatens to build one.

By Josh Regin November 18



President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin speak during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, on Nov. 11. (Mikhail Klimentyev/Sputnik/Kremlin Pool/EPA-EFE/REX/Shutterstock)

The Trump administration is trying to fix a badly broken nuclear-arms-control treaty with Russia, which has been violating the agreement for years. And part of the U.S. plan to counter Russia's building of treaty-violating missiles is to develop some treaty-violating missiles of its own.

The U.S. government has known [since 2012](#) that Russia was in violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Signed by President Ronald Reagan, the bilateral U.S.-Russian pact bars construction, testing or deployment of missiles or delivery systems with a range of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. For years, Republicans in Congress pressed the Obama administration to confront the Russians.

Last November, Obama administration officials met with their Russian counterparts to demand that they admit to building a new cruise missile in violation of the treaty, but the Russian side denied it. In February, U.S. intelligence agencies determined that Russia took another step forward and [actually deployed the missile](#), which could threaten large parts of Europe.

Now, the Trump team is trying again to confront Moscow, but this time with what they see as new leverage. The administration is supporting congressional efforts to fund research and development for a U.S. cruise missile with the same capability, to show the Russians they aren't they only ones who can play that game.

The [defense policy bill](#) Congress is expected to pass this month would authorize the Defense Department to spend \$58 million to counter Russia's INF violations, including by developing a new ground-launched cruise missile, a direct push for the administration to raise the stakes with Moscow. Developing the missile doesn't put the United States in breach of the treaty; actually building it would.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has called for another meeting of what's called the [Special Verification Commission](#), a forum where U.S. and Russian officials can try to sort out the conflict, two U.S. officials told me.

Fiona Hill, the National Security Council's senior director for Russia, and Christopher Ford, the NSC's senior director for nonproliferation, briefed Congress on the plan last month, congressional officials said. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis [briefed NATO defense ministers in Brussels on Nov. 9](#).

"The discussion included a consideration of the Russian Federation's violation of the Intermediate[-Range] Nuclear Forces Treaty and our collective efforts to bring Russia back to compliance," Mattis told reporters. "This is absolutely necessary to sustain confidence in the arms-control agreement."

Democrats in Congress are supportive of the administration's efforts to save the treaty but skeptical that moving towards a U.S. version of the

Russian treaty-busting missile will have the desired effect.

“We know that Russia has not been in compliance with the INF. We want them to stay in the INF,” Senate Foreign Relations Committee ranking Democrat Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.) told me. “I’m not in favor of us accelerating the conflict by us developing something that could be in conflict. So I’m not sure it’s helpful.”

Former assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation Tom Countryman told me that by moving in the same direction as the Russians, the Trump administration might actually be playing into their hands.

“In a sense that’s what the Russians want us to do, to provoke us into violating the treaty and suffering the results,” he said. “Would I be surprised to see this president fall into that trap? No. But I hope he doesn’t.”

Arms-control advocates are encouraged that the Trump team is looking to save the treaty rather than just trash it, but they are also skeptical of the plan to develop a U.S. version of the missile. For one, they say, it’s not clear European countries would support what amounts to an escalation in their region. Also, as a negotiating tactic, it’s not likely to work.

“It would be a mistake to believe that the pursuit of a INF-noncompliant cruise missile by the United States will compel Russia to acknowledge and rectify its suspected INF violations,” said Arms Control Association Executive Director Daryl Kimball, who has discussed this issue with U.S. and Russian officials in recent weeks.

But critics of the Trump plan admit they don’t have any better solutions. If the Russian government won’t even admit it is in violation, there’s little hope they will negotiate a fix in good faith. If there’s no agreement on the facts, there can be no agreement on the solution.

The Trump administration should move forward with its carrot-and-stick approach, if only to be able to say it tried to work with Moscow. But when that fails, Trump will face a decision: Keep a broken treaty with Putin or risk a nuclear-arms race.

## Mikhail Gorbachev: My plea to the presidents of Russia and the United States



President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at a signing ceremony for the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in the White House on Dec. 8, 1987. (Bary Thumma/AP)

By Mikhail Gorbachev October 11

*Mikhail Gorbachev was leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991.*

This December will mark the 30th anniversary of the signing of [the treaty](#) between the Soviet Union and United States on the elimination of intermediate- and shorter-range missiles. This was the start of the process of radically cutting back nuclear arsenals, which was continued

with the 1991 and 2010 strategic arms reduction treaties and the agreements reducing tactical nuclear weapons.

The scale of the process launched in 1987 is evidenced by the fact that, as Russia and the United States reported to the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in 2015, 80 percent of the nuclear weapons accumulated during the Cold War have been decommissioned and destroyed. Another important fact is that, despite the recent serious deterioration in bilateral relations, both sides have been complying with the strategic weapons agreements.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, however, is now in jeopardy. It has proved to be the most vulnerable link in the system of limiting and reducing weapons of mass destruction. There have been calls on both sides for scrapping the agreement.

So what is happening, what is the problem, and what needs to be done?

Both sides have raised issues of compliance, accusing the other of violating or circumventing the treaty's key provisions. From the sidelines, lacking fuller information, it is difficult to evaluate those accusations. But one thing is clear: The problem has a political as well as a technical aspect. It is up to the political leaders to take action.

Therefore I am making an appeal to the presidents of Russia and the United States.

Relations between the two nations are in a severe crisis. A way out must be sought, and there is one well-tested means available for accomplishing this: a dialogue based on mutual respect.

It will not be easy to cut through the logjam of issues on both sides. But neither was our dialogue easy three decades ago. It had its critics and detractors, who tried to derail it.

In the final analysis, it was the political will of the two nations' leaders that proved decisive. And that is what's needed now. This is what our two countries' citizens and people everywhere expect from the presidents of Russia and the United States.

I call upon Russia and the United States to prepare and hold a full-scale summit on the entire range of issues. It is far from normal that the presidents of major nuclear powers meet merely "on the margins" of international gatherings. I hope that the process of preparing a proper summit is in the works even now.

I believe that the summit meeting should focus on the problems of reducing nuclear weapons and strengthening strategic stability. For should the system of nuclear arms control collapse, as may well happen if the INF Treaty is scrapped, the consequences, both direct and indirect, will be disastrous.

The closer that nuclear weapons are deployed to borders, the more dangerous they are: There is less time for a decision and greater risk of catastrophic error. And what will happen to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if the nuclear arms race begins anew? I am afraid it will be ruined.

If, however, the INF Treaty is saved, it will send a powerful signal to the world that the two biggest nuclear powers are aware of their responsibility and take their obligations seriously. Everyone will breathe a sigh of relief, and relations between Russia and the United States will finally get off the ground again.

I am confident that preparing a joint presidential statement on the two nations' commitment to the INF Treaty is a realistic goal. Simultaneously, the technical issues could be resolved; for this purpose, the joint control commission under the INF Treaty could resume its work. I am convinced that, with an impetus from the two presidents, the generals and diplomats would be able to reach agreement.

We are living in a troubled world. It is particularly disturbing that relations between the major nuclear powers, Russia and the United States, have become a serious source of tensions and a hostage to domestic politics. It is time to return to sanity. I am sure that even inveterate opponents of normalizing U.S.-Russian relations will not dare object to the two presidents. These critics have no arguments on their side, for the very fact that the INF Treaty has been in effect for 30 years proves that it serves the security interests of our two countries and of the world.

In any undertaking, it is important to take the first step. In 1987, the first step in the difficult but vitally important process of ridding the world of nuclear weapons was the INF Treaty. Today, we face a dual challenge of preventing the collapse of the system of nuclear agreements and reversing the downward spiral in U.S.-Russian relations. It is time to take the first step.