

President Trump to pull US from Russia missile treaty

2 hours ago



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Image caption

Russia denies building missiles that violate the accord

The US will withdraw from a landmark nuclear weapons treaty with Russia, President Donald Trump has confirmed.

Speaking to reporters, Mr Trump said Russia had "violated" the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

The deal banned ground-launched medium-range missiles, with a range of between 500 and 5,500km (310-3,400 miles).

The US would not let Russia "go out and do weapons [while] we're not allowed to", Mr Trump said.

"I don't know why President [Barack] Obama didn't negotiate or pull out," the president said after a campaign rally in Nevada. "They've been violating it for many years."

In 2014, **President Obama accused Russia of breaching the INF** after it allegedly tested a ground-launched cruise missile. He reportedly chose not to withdraw from the treaty under pressure from European leaders, who said such a move could restart an arms race.

A Russian foreign ministry source said the US move was motivated by a "dream of a unipolar world" where it is the only global superpower, state news agency RIA Novosti reported.

Russia denies breaking missile treaty

Tensions rise as US threatens to 'take out' Russian missiles

The US insists the Russians have, in breach of the deal, developed a new medium-range missile called the the Novator 9M729 - known to Nato as the SSC-8.

It would enable Russia to launch a nuclear strike at Nato countries at very short notice.

Russia has said little about its new missile other than to deny that it is in breach of the agreement.

Analysts say Russia sees such weapons as a cheaper alternative to conventional forces.

The New York Times reported on Friday **the US was considering withdrawing from the treaty in a bid to counter China's expanding military presence** in the western Pacific.

The country was not a signatory of the deal, allowing it to develop medium-range missiles without restraint.

National Security Adviser John Bolton is expected to tell the Russians of the withdrawal during talks in Moscow later this week.

What is the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty?



Image copyright
AFP

Image caption
Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan signed the INF treaty in 1987

Signed by the US and the USSR in 1987, **the arms control deal banned all nuclear and non-nuclear missiles with short and medium ranges**, except sea-launched weapons

The US had been concerned by the Soviet deployment of the SS-20 missile system and responded by placing Pershing and Cruise missiles in Europe - sparking widespread protests

By 1991, nearly 2,700 missiles had been destroyed. Both countries were allowed to inspect the others installations

In 2007, Russian president Vladimir Putin declared the treaty no longer served Russia's interests. The move came after the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002

The last time the US withdrew from a major arms treaty was in 2002, when President George W Bush pulled the US out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which banned weapons designed to counter ballistic nuclear missiles. His administration's moves to set up a missile shield in Europe alarmed the Kremlin, and was scrapped by the Obama administration in 2009 to be replaced by a modified defence system in 2016.

Russia nuclear treaty: Gorbachev warns Trump plan will undermine disarmament

2 hours ago



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image caption

Mr Gorbachev has questioned the sense of withdrawing from the INF

Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev says US President Trump's plan to withdraw from a key Cold War nuclear weapons treaty is a reversal of efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament.

Mr Gorbachev - who signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with President Reagan in 1987 - questioned the plan's intelligence.

Mr Trump said Russia had been "violating [the INF] for many years".

Russia has condemned the plans and threatened to retaliate.

The Kremlin said President Vladimir Putin would be seeking an explanation from visiting US National Security Adviser John Bolton.

Germany was the first US ally to criticise the move, with Foreign Minister Heiko Maas urging Washington to consider the consequences both for Europe and for future disarmament efforts.

The INF banned ground-launched medium-range missiles, with a range of between 500 and 5,500km (310-3,400 miles).

Donald Trump: US will build up nuclear arsenal

7 hours ago



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image caption

Mr Trump says Russia has violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty, which he has threatened to abandon

President Donald Trump has warned that the US will bolster its nuclear arsenal to put pressure on Russia and China.

Speaking to reporters, he repeated his belief that Russia has violated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, which he has threatened to leave. Russia denies this.

The Cold War-era treaty banned medium-range missiles, reducing the perceived Soviet threat to European nations.

Russia has warned it will respond in kind if the US develops more weapons.

Mr Trump said the US would build up its arsenal "until people come to their senses".

Is this back to a nuclear arms race?

He added: "It's a threat to whoever you want to include China and it includes Russia and it includes anybody else that wants to play that game... [Russia has] not adhered to the spirit of that agreement or to the agreement itself."

Meanwhile, US National Security Adviser John Bolton has been holding talks in Moscow after Russia condemned the US plan to quit the deal.

Mr Bolton was told that the US withdrawal would be a "serious blow" to the non-proliferation regime.

Banned range for ground-launched and cruise missiles under INF treaty



BBC

However, Russia's Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev also said the Kremlin was "ready" to work with the US to remove "mutual" grievances over the INF.

As Mr Bolton began his visit, Moscow warned it would take steps to maintain the balance of nuclear power.

"We need to hear the American side's explanation on this issue," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

"Scraping the treaty forces Russia to take steps for its own security."

Russia nuclear treaty: US warned over threat to scrap deal

14 minutes ago



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EPA

Image caption

Russia denies building missiles that violate the accord

Russia has condemned US plans to withdraw from a key nuclear weapons treaty and threatened to retaliate over the "very dangerous step".

On Saturday, President Trump said he intended to "terminate" the three-decade-old 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

He said Russia had been "violating it for many years".

The deal banned ground-launched medium-range missiles, with a range of between 500 and 5,500km (310-3,400 miles).

What exactly has Trump said?

President Trump said the US would not let Russia "go out and do weapons [while] we're not allowed to".

"I don't know why President [Barack] Obama didn't negotiate or pull out," the president said of the INF treaty after a campaign rally in Nevada.

Russia denies breaking missile treaty

Tensions rise as US threatens to 'take out' Russian missiles

In 2014, **President Obama accused Russia of breaching the INF** after it allegedly tested a ground-launched cruise missile. He reportedly chose not to withdraw from the treaty under pressure from European leaders, who said such a move could restart an arms race.

US National Security Adviser John Bolton is expected to confirm the withdrawal during talks in Moscow later this week.

How has Russia responded?

"This would be a very dangerous step that, I'm sure, not only will not be comprehended by the international community but will provoke serious condemnation," Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said.



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image caption

Russia's deputy foreign minister accused the US of using "a method of blackmail"

The treaty is "significant for international security and security in the sphere of nuclear arms, for the maintenance of strategic stability," he told state news agency Tass.

Mr Ryabkov said Russia condemned US attempts to gain concessions "through a method of blackmail".

The minister also told the news agency RIA Novosti that if the US continues to behave "clumsily and crudely" and backs out of international agreements, "then we will have no choice but to undertake retaliatory measures, including involving military technology".

"But we would not want to get to this stage," he added.

'A significant setback'

Analysis by BBC defence and diplomatic correspondent Jonathan Marcus

Concern about Russia's development and deployment of a missile system that breaches the INF treaty predates the Trump administration. But the president's decision to walk away from the agreement marks a significant setback for arms control.

Many experts believe that negotiations should have continued to try to bring the Russians back into compliance. It is, they fear, part of the wider unravelling of the whole system of arms control treaties that helped to curb strategic competition during the Cold War.

Other factors too may have played into President Trump's decision. This was a bilateral treaty between Washington and Moscow. China was free to develop and deploy intermediate range nuclear missiles. Some in the Trump administration feel that the INF treaty places them at a growing disadvantage in their developing strategic rivalry with Beijing .

Has Russia breached the treaty?

The US insists the Russians have, in breach of the deal, developed a new medium-range missile called the Novator 9M729 - known to Nato as the SSC-8.

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The country was not a signatory of the deal, allowing it to develop medium-range missiles without restraint.

John Bolton pushing Trump to withdraw from Russian nuclear arms treaty

Exclusive: national security adviser recommends ending intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty over alleged Russia violations

Julian Borger in Washington

Fri 19 Oct 2018 18.46 BST

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The US national security adviser, John Bolton, has issued a recommendation for withdrawal from the 1987 intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty. Photograph: Alex Wong/Getty Images

John Bolton is pushing for the US to withdraw from a cold war-era arms control treaty with Russia, in the face of resistance from others in the **Trump administration** and US allies, according to sources briefed on the initiative.

Bolton, Donald Trump's third national security adviser, has issued a recommendation for withdrawal from the 1987 intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty (INF), which the US says Russia has been violating with the development of a new cruise missile.



US Nato envoy's threat to Russia: stop developing missile or we'll 'take it out'

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Withdrawal from the treaty, which would mark a sharp break in US arms control policy, has yet to be agreed upon by cabinet and faces opposition from within the state department and the Pentagon. A meeting on Monday at the White House to discuss the withdrawal proposal was postponed.

Bolton, who has spent his career opposing arms control treaties, is seeking to shrug off the traditional role of national security adviser as a policy broker between the agencies, and become a driver of radical change from within the White House.

Former US officials say Bolton is blocking talks on extending the 2010 **NewStart** treaty with Russia limiting deployed strategic nuclear warheads and their delivery systems. The treaty is due to expire in 2021 and Moscow has signaled its interest in an extension, but Bolton is opposing the resumption of a strategic stability dialogue to discuss the future of arms control between the two countries.

The US has briefed its European allies this week about the proposal, sounding out reactions. The briefing alarmed UK officials who see the INF as an important arms control pillar. The treaty marked the end of a dangerous nuclear standoff in 1980s Europe pitting US Pershing and cruise missiles against the Soviet Union's SS-20 medium-range missiles.

The US alleges Russia is now **violating the treaty** with the development and deployment of a ground-launched cruise missile, known as the 9M729. Moscow insists the missile does not violate the range restrictions in the INF and alleges in return that a US missile defence system deployed in eastern Europe against a potential Iranian threat can be adapted to fire medium-range offensive missiles at Russia.

The National Security Council (NSC) declined to comment on the fate of the INF.

"The US has started to brief allies with the possibility of withdrawal. But I don't believe there has been any kind of interagency process in the administration," said Jon Wolfsthal, a former senior director for non-proliferation and arms control at the NSC.

The Trump administration's **Nuclear Posture Review**, released in February, called for the US to do research on its own ground-launched medium-range missiles as a way of pressuring Moscow back into INF compliance. It did not advocate leaving the treaty.

That review was completed before Bolton came to the White House and he is now seeking to toughen the

administration's nuclear stance further. Over the summer he brought into the White House another hardliner on arms control, **Tim Morrison**, the former Republican policy director on the House armed services committee, and between them they have taken the lead on arms control issues away from the state department.

Provisional plans had been made to resume a strategic stability dialogue in September, led on the US side by Andrea Thompson, the under secretary for arms control at the state department and the Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov.

Bolton's meeting with his Russian counterpart, Nikolai Patrushev, in Geneva in August, was expected to give the final green light to the dialogue, but Bolton is said to have blocked it. He is due to visit Moscow next week, when the Kremlin said he may meet Vladimir Putin.

In remarks in **Sochi on Thursday**, Putin appeared to suggest that Russia would adopt a "no first use" policy on nuclear weapons.

"We have no concept of a pre-emptive strike," he told a conference. "[W]e expect to be struck by nuclear weapons, but we will not use them first," he said.

A meeting of Nato defence ministers earlier this month in Brussels issued a joint statement saying the INF "has been crucial to Euro-Atlantic security and we remain fully committed to the preservation of this landmark arms control treaty".

However, the US defence secretary, James Mattis, made it clear that all options were on the table in Washington's response to Russian violations.

"Our discussions here were to ensure that we answered all questions that any of the nations had, and that we look at what options do we have, and to make certain that all the nations had input to me as I go into the discussions in Washington," Mattis said. "This will be a decision obviously made in concert with our allies by the president, and we'll take it from there."

Arms control advocates argue that walking out on the INF is premature before any detailed negotiations between US and Russian specialists on resolving the row over compliance. They said it would also hand a propaganda victory to Moscow.

Alexandra Bell, a former senior arms control official at the state department, now at the Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, said that in informal, "track two" discussions, Russian arms control experts suggested Moscow might be ready for a compromise to salvage the INF.

"You should be able to get somewhere with the Russians, but Bolton doesn't seem interested," Bell said.

"The decision has been taken in the NSC [National Security Council] that the US should withdraw, and they are trying to persuade other parts of the administration. There has been no formal Trump decision yet," said Hans Kristensen, the director of the nuclear information project at the Federation of the American Scientists. "Very little good will come of this, other than another round of nuclear escalation with **Russia**."

Daryl Kimball, the head of the Washington-DC based Arms Control Association, said: "For the US it would be a disastrous own goal to pull out when it has been Russia that has been in non-compliance for some time. It will open the door for Russia to expand its small and relatively insubstantial ground-launched missile arsenal."

US to loosen nuclear weapons constraints and develop more 'usable' warheads

New proposal is significantly more hawkish than Obama-era policy

Critics call development of new weapons 'dangerous, Cold War thinking'

Julian Borger in Washington

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Control centre Norad (Cheyenne Mountain) near Colorado Springs. The new nuclear policy is significantly more hawkish than the posture adopted by the Obama administration. Photograph: Ulrich Baumgarten/U. Baumgarten via Getty Images

The Trump administration plans to loosen constraints on the use of **nuclear weapons** and develop a new low-yield nuclear warhead for US Trident missiles, according to a former official who has seen the most recent draft of a policy review.

Jon Wolfsthal, who was special assistant to Barack Obama on arms control and nonproliferation, said the new nuclear posture review prepared by the Pentagon, envisages a modified version of the Trident D5 submarine-launched missiles with only part of its normal warhead, with the intention of deterring Russia from using tactical warheads in a conflict in Eastern Europe.

The new nuclear policy is significantly more hawkish than the posture adopted by the Obama administration, which **sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US defence**.

Trump is the real nuclear threat, and we can't just fantasise him away
Jonathan Freedland

Arms control advocates have **voiced alarm at the new proposal to make smaller, more "usable" nuclear weapons**, arguing it makes a nuclear war more likely, especially in view of what they see as Donald Trump's volatility and readiness to brandish the US arsenal in showdowns with the nation's adversaries.

The NPR also expands the circumstances in which the US might use its nuclear arsenal, to include a response to a non-nuclear attack that caused mass casualties, or was aimed at critical infrastructure or nuclear command and control sites.

The nuclear posture review (NPR), the first in eight years, is expected to be published after Donald Trump's State of the Union speech at the end of January.

Wolfsthal, who has reviewed what he understands to be the final draft of the review, said it states that the US will start work on reintroducing a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile, as a counter to a new ground-launched cruise missile the US has accused Russia of developing in violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

Wolfsthal said that earlier drafts of the NPR was even more hawkish. The final draft drops proposals to develop a nuclear hyper-glide weapon, and to remove assurances to non nuclear weapons states that the US will not use its nuclear arsenal against them.

"My read is this is a walk-back from how extreme it was early on. It doesn't have as much terrible stuff in it as it did originally," Wolfsthal said. "But it's still bad."

"What I've been told by the people who wrote the thing was what they were trying to do was to send a clear deterrent message to Russians, the North Korean and the Chinese. And there is pretty good, moderate but strong language that makes clear that any attempt by Russia or North Korea to use nuclear weapons would result in a massive consequence for them and I think that's actually moderate, centrist and probably very

much needed.”

“Where they go overboard, is where they say that in order to make that credible the US needs to develop two new types of nuclear weapons,” he added.

Wolfsthal said the modified Trident warhead, with just the primary (fission) part of its thermonuclear warhead, was “totally unnecessary” as the US already has low-yield weapons, B61 gravity bombs and air-launched cruise missiles, in its arsenal.

He also said it was “pretty dumb” to put a low-yield “tactical” weapon on the planned new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines, because firing it would give away a submarine’s position.

“We spend \$5bn per submarine to make it invisible and we put a lot of warheads on each submarine and so what they want to do is take one missile, put one small warhead on it and launch it first, so the submarine is vulnerable to Russian attack.” Wolfsthal said. “That strikes me as being unsustainable from a naval strategy point of view.”

The development of a low-yield warhead for a sea-launched ballistic missile is based on the belief that in any conflict with Russia on Nato’s eastern flank, the Russians would use a tactical nuclear weapon early on, to compensate for their relative weakness in conventional arms. The Russians, the argument goes, would count on US reluctance to use the massive warheads on its existing weapons, leading Washington to back down.

Hans Kristensen, the director of the nuclear information project at the Federation of American Scientists, said that justification for developing the new weapons was incoherent.

“It assumes that the intelligence community has determined that one or several adversaries out there are gambling that the US would be self-deterred from using a ballistic missile warhead because they have larger yield. That’s just not the case. We have never, ever heard anyone say that is so,” Kristensen said.

“I don’t think any adversary – certainly not Russia, – would gamble that if they did something with nukes that were low yield that we would not respond. That’s completely ludicrous,” he added. “I think this is about having some warhead work at the laboratories and exploring options. I don’t see this as a real mission.

Daryl Kimball, the head of the Arms Control Association, said that the development of new weapons in the US nuclear arsenal was “dangerous, Cold War thinking”.

“The United States already possesses a diverse array of nuclear capabilities, and there is no evidence that more usable weapons will strengthen deterrence of adversaries or compel them to make different choices about their arsenals,” Kimball wrote on the [Arms Control Today](#) website.

He also cautioned against moves to broaden the circumstances in which nuclear weapons would be used.

“The use of even a small number of these weapons would be catastrophic,” Kimball said. “Threatening nuclear attack to counter new kinds of ‘asymmetric’ threats is unnecessary, would increase the risk of nuclear weapons use, and would make it easier for other countries to justify excessive roles for nuclear weapons in their policies.”

Trump denounced nuclear arms treaty in phone call with Putin – sources

The president’s reported remarks on the Obama-era New Start treaty between the US and Russia have provoked alarm among security specialists

Julian Borger and Ben Jacobs in Washington

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Donald Trump speaks with Vladimir Putin in the Oval Office on 28 January. Photograph: UPI / Barcroft Images

Donald Trump has told **Vladimir Putin** he does not want to renew a 2010 arms control treaty that limits the number of strategic nuclear weapons the US and Russia can deploy.

Trump angrily denounced the New Start treaty in a 28 January phone call to the Russian leader, according to sources briefed on the call. Reuters, which **first reported** Trump's remarks, said the new US president also had to pause the hour-long call to ask what the New Start treaty was.

The White House spokesman, Sean Spicer, confirmed that the call was paused but said it was because the president wanted to solicit the views of his aides.

"It wasn't like he didn't know what was being said," Spicer said. "He wanted an opinion on something."

He did not give any further details, describing the hour-long conversation as a "private call". The Kremlin had previously characterised it as a friendly discussion in which "both sides demonstrated a mood for active, joint work on stabilizing and developing Russian-American cooperation".

According to accounts of the conversation given to the Guardian, the phone call began with a friendly exchange, with both leaders stressing their own popularity and complimenting each other on their domestic support. Then when Putin brought up two issues on which their countries had cooperated on, New Start and the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, Trump lost his temper, dismissing both as strategic losses for the US given away by Barack Obama, and he began hectoring Putin.

The New Start treaty, agreed between Obama and the then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, **obliges both countries to reduce their strategic arsenals**, including land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles and long-range bombers to 1,550 warheads each by 2018. There are also limits on the number of missile launchers each side can have.

A clause in the treaty allows the agreement to be extended by up to five years by mutual agreement. According to the Reuters report, it was when Putin raised the possibility of extension, that Trump paused the call to ask about the treaty, and then returned to the conversation with a tirade against the agreement.

Thomas Countryman, former assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation, said he had raised the possibility of New Start's extension last month with his Russian counterpart, deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov.

"Both capitals have known that the extension of the treaty ... would be an easy win-win that could set a new tone for relations between the two countries," said Countryman. "I'm deeply disturbed that the president was not just neutral on the question, not just negative – saying not right now – but actually seemed to take a step backward in calling into question an agreement that is beneficial to both sides and has been implemented faithfully by both sides."

Countryman was **suddenly removed from his position at the end of last month** while on his way to a nuclear weapons conference in Rome, as part of a purge of senior state department officials who have yet to be replaced, leaving the department's senior ranks seriously depleted.

Countryman said he had no first-hand knowledge of the tone or content of the Putin call, but said it was

“ominous” if the president had not been fully briefed on New Start before talking to the Russian leader.

“If it is all going to be seat-of-the-pants – ‘last time I looked on Twitter’ –rather than pursuing a carefully prepared agenda, that’s disturbing,” Countryman said.

Both before and after his election victory, Trump has made dramatically contradictory statements on the US nuclear arsenal. He denounced the agreement, which he referred to as “Start Up” in a **presidential debate in October**, wrongly claiming that it meant Russia could “create warheads and we can’t”.

In December, he tweeted that the US should “**expand its nuclear capability**” and told a reporter: “Let it be an arms race.”

In an interview shortly before inauguration, however, he appeared to offer deep bilateral cuts in nuclear arsenals accompanied by sanctions relief for Moscow, saying: “I think nuclear weapons should be way down and reduced very substantially.”

Joseph Cirincione, the head of the disarmament advocacy group, the Ploughshares Fund, said Trump was “tripping up over his own narcissism. He is letting his personal prejudices get in the way of his strategic goal. He is picking a fight with Putin who he wants better relations with.”

New Start was approved by the Senate and has the overwhelming support of the US military establishment, including **seven past commanders of US nuclear forces**. But it has critics on the right wing of the Republican party and some US conservatives.

“There are a lot of critics that say that New Start really got the US nothing and it allowed the Russians free space to grow their strategic nuclear deterrent,” James Jay Carafano, a national security and foreign policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation.

Steven Pifer, a former senior state department official, argued that if the US walked out of New Start now, it would give Russia a strategic advantage as it already has functioning production lines producing new nuclear weapons to replace the old.

Pifer, now at the Brookings institution, said the report suggested Trump “really doesn’t have a good understanding of nuclear balance between Russia and the United States”.

Countryman said he feared that if arms control broke down between Washington and Moscow, it could pave the way to an accelerated arms race.

“The Obama administration was frustrated we were not able to move forward with the Russian Federation on logical next steps in arms control,” he said. “But we didn’t move backwards, and I am very concerned that now we are.”

Tensions rise as US threatens to 'take out' Russian missiles

By Jonathan Marcus
BBC Defence and diplomatic correspondent
2 hours ago



Image copyright
REUTERS

Image caption

Kay Bailey Hutchison said the US wanted to find a diplomatic solution to this problem

The threat from a senior US diplomat to "take out" Russian missiles that Washington believes are in breach of an important Cold War arms control treaty looks set to cause additional tensions with Moscow, just ahead of a meeting of Nato defence ministers that opens in Brussels on Wednesday.

The US ambassador to Nato, Kay Bailey Hutchison, was speaking ahead of that meeting and brought up once again Washington's contention that Russia is in breach of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement of 1987.

This treaty banned a whole category of weapons: ground-launched medium-range missiles, capable of striking targets at distances between 500 and 5,500km (310-3,100 miles).

Russia denies breaking missile treaty

Syria crisis: Russian Caspian missiles 'fell in Iran'

Now, the Americans insist, despite Russian denials, that Moscow has a new medium-range missile in its inventory - the Novator 9M729 - known to Nato as the SSC-8.

This would enable Russia to launch a nuclear strike at Nato countries at very short notice.



Image copyright
AFP

Image caption

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan signed the INF treaty in 1987

Ambassador Hutchison said the US wants to find a diplomatic solution to this problem.

But she appeared to indicate that the US might consider military action if Russia's development of the system continued.

"At that point we would be looking at the capability to take out a (Russian) missile that could hit any of our countries," she said, adding counter-measures (by the US) would be to take out the missiles that are in development by Russia in violation of the treaty.

"They are on notice."

At first sight, this seems to be a fairly blunt warning from President Donald Trump's Nato ambassador. But it is not exactly clear what she is saying. Is she threatening a pre-emptive strike out of the blue? Surely not. Is she warning that if the Russian development of these weapons goes ahead then the US will find systems to target them in the event of a crisis?

Indeed, other US experts have sometimes suggested that a more likely US response might be to throw over the INF treaty itself and deploy a similar category of weapon.

That would be very bad news for arms control.

Back in the Cold War, the US was alarmed at the then Soviet Union's deployment of the SS-20 system.

Some of Washington's allies agreed to receive US Pershing and Cruise missiles in response. The move prompted widespread protests and huge political tensions.

The resulting INF treaty swept this whole category of weapon away and significantly reduced tensions.



Image copyright

AFP

Image caption

Mr Putin and ex-President Barack Obama had diplomatic run-ins over the INF Treaty

But now, once again, the INF Treaty is back in the news.

Russia has said little about its new missile other than to deny that it is in breach of the agreement.

It has not answered any of the Nato countries' concerns.

Indeed, in his pre-ministerial press conference, Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted that "the most plausible assessment would be that Russia is in violation of the treaty".

"It is therefore urgent," he went on, "that Russia addresses these concerns in a substantial and transparent manner."

He also added that, according to US intelligence, Russia had started to deploy the new missile.

Media caption

Russia launched missiles from the Caspian Sea on targets in Syria in 2015

Exactly what the Americans know is still not clear.

For a long time experts were not even certain which specific missile was being talked about. Is this just an extended range version of the Iskander-M - an existing Russian weapon?

Or could it be a new variant of the sea-launched Kalibr land attack missile that has been used by the Russian navy against targets in Syria?

Whatever the details, the US insists the Russians are in breach of the INF agreement. That matters.

Ambassador Hutchison may have spoken a little loosely. Russia's foreign affairs ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said: "It seems that people who make such statements do not realise the level of their responsibility and the danger of aggressive rhetoric."

But if the deployment of the weapon continues, then the US could well make some equivalent move in response.

The issue is bound to be high on the agenda when Nato defence ministers meet in Brussels.