

Washington's ultimatum on INF treaty heightens threat of nuclear war

By Bill Van Auken
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US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a blunt ultimatum to Moscow Tuesday, vowing that the US will unilaterally abrogate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, one of the last remaining arms control agreements from the Cold War, within 60 days unless Russia submits to what Washington defines as compliance with the pact. The move represents a major escalation of the threat of global nuclear war.

The 60-day period was a concession of sorts to the European powers and in particular Germany, whose Chancellor Angela Merkel pressed US President Donald Trump at the recent G20 summit in Buenos Aires not to follow through with plans to summarily upend the INF Treaty.

Signed in 1987 by the US and the former Soviet Union, the accord banned both nuclear and nonnuclear land-based missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers (about 310 to 3,400 miles).

Accepted by Moscow under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet president, who was embarked upon a program of capitalist restoration, the treaty represented a strategic concession to the United States, which far outstripped the Soviet Union in airborne and sea-launched missiles.

A secret memo drafted by Trump's National Security Adviser John Bolton and obtained by the *Washington Post* instructed the US secretary of state to "make all necessary arrangements" to withdraw from the treaty "no later than December 4, 2018," and the US defense secretary to "develop and deploy ground-launched missiles at the earliest possible date."

While Washington succeeded in pressuring NATO into supporting its ultimatum to Russia, there is deep disquiet in Europe over the scrapping of the agreement, which poses the return of US short and medium-range missiles to the continent and the redoubled threat that it will become a principal battlefield in any nuclear exchange between the US and Russia. The deployment of US Pershing II missiles in Germany in the 1980s triggered mass popular protests against the threat of war.

According to the *Washington Post*, Merkel and other European officials told Trump that an immediate withdrawal from the treaty would "not give them enough time to explain the policy change to domestic audiences."

"European leaders fear that their voters could be sympathetic to a Kremlin argument that the United States is tearing up one international agreement after another, after Trump's decision to leave the Paris climate agreement and the Iran nuclear deal," the *Post* reported.

In other words, European leaders fear that their populations will see the move for what it is, a ratcheting up of US imperialist aggression, and popular antiwar sentiment will become fused with already escalating class tensions like the ones that have played out in clashes across France in recent weeks.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, a reliable stooge of US interests, nonetheless responded to the development by stating, "I regret that we now most likely will see the end of the INF Treaty. We really felt that the world was moving forward when the Soviet Union and the United States in 1987 agreed."

The 60-day countdown to the US formal repudiation of the treaty is supposed to provide time for Russia to cease its alleged violations of the pact. There is no indication, however, that Moscow can do anything to satisfy Washington demands—Russia insists that it is already in compliance. For that matter, it is clear that the Trump administration has no desire to reach an agreement that would keep the agreement in place.

In announcing the US decision to a two-day meeting of NATO foreign ministers, Secretary of State Pompeo made it clear that Washington's scrapping of the accord is aimed not at punishing some alleged Russian transgression, but rather at bolstering US strategic advantage in any future war with both Russia and China.

"There is no reason the United States should continue to cede this crucial military advantage to revisionist powers like China," Pompeo said.

China, which was not a party to the bilateral 1987 treaty, has developed its own land-based short- and medium-range missiles to counter US attempts to militarily encircle the country in its "Pivot to Asia," which has included a massive redeployment of US armed forces to the Pacific and East Asia.

Russia has repeatedly denied that its missile systems are in violation of the INF Treaty. It has countercharged that US Aegis missile defense systems deployed in Romania and

Poland constitute a violation because they are easily adaptable for the launching of offensive cruise missiles.

Russian President Vladimir Putin Wednesday mocked Pompeo's announcement, stating that it was "a bit late" in announcing Washington's intentions.

"First the American side said it's determined to withdraw from the treaty on intermediate- and shorter-range missiles, then they started to look for reasons why they should do this," he said. "As usual they're not providing any evidence of these violations by us."

Putin added that if the US sought to develop such weapons, Moscow's response would be "simple." "We will also do this," he said.

There is an element of madness in Washington's headlong rush toward deployment, which would effectively place nuclear conflagration on a hair trigger by relying on weapons that take only minutes to reach their targets.

The reckless drive toward a nuclear arms race is unfolding in the context of multiple military flashpoints that could erupt into war between the world's two largest nuclear powers. These include the provocation staged by Ukraine in the Sea of Azov last week, which brought Russian and Ukrainian forces into direct confrontation for the first time since the US-backed, fascist-led coup in Kiev in 2014. This has been followed by a provocative "freedom of navigation" exercise Wednesday, sending a US guided-missile destroyer into the Peter the Great Gulf, the base of the Russian Navy's Pacific fleet.

The decision on the INF, like all of Washington's war policy in the Middle East, Asia and Eastern Europe, is driven by the crisis of the capitalist system, characterized by the ever-sharpening contradiction between a global economy and an outmoded nation-state system and expressed most acutely in the attempt by US imperialism, in the aftermath of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union, to overcome the protracted decline of its economic position by means of military force.

One significant response to the announcement on the countdown to the end of the INF treaty came from the magazine *National Defense*, a trade publication for the military-industrial complex, which speculated on the profits that would flow to arms manufacturers once production of new short- and medium-range missiles resumed.

It pointed out that the "Pershing II program cost \$692 million for research, development, testing and evaluation, and \$1.76 billion to procure 247 missiles, according to the Government Accountability Office. A conventional ground-launched cruise missile, the GLCM, that was deployed at that time cost \$383 million for RDT&E, and \$2.72 billion to procure 442 missiles."

Given rising costs, tens of billions of dollars more are to be made in the rush toward nuclear war. Even before the abrogation of the treaty, US nuclear weapons spending was projected to reach \$1.7 trillion over 30 years. These vast sums are to be extracted from the working class, diverted from social resources needed to provide jobs, housing, health care,

education and other vital needs for the masses of the population.

Ranking Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations, Armed Services and Intelligence committees sent Trump a letter on Monday questioning whether the way in which he was scuttling the treaty served to take "the focus away from Russia's transgressions and malign behavior" as well as the failure to consult with Congress and the lack of what they termed a "strategic alternative."

But Trump announced his decision to terminate the INF treaty on October 20 in the heat of the midterm elections. No Democratic candidate nor the leadership of the party chose to make this move, which threatens the survival of the entire population of the US and the world, an issue in the campaign. On the contrary, the Democrats have centered their opposition to the Trump administration on allegations of "collusion" with Moscow in the 2016 presidential campaign and charges that Trump has been too "soft" on Russia.

Likewise the major media has given scant attention to the scrapping of one of the last remaining agreements restricting an all-out arms race and headlong rush to nuclear war. Neither the *New York Times* nor the *Washington Post* published any front-page article or editorial on the subject Wednesday.

There is no antiwar faction within the US ruling establishment, nor any interest on the part of the Democrats or the corporate media in alerting the American people to the growing threat of a global nuclear conflagration.

This threat can be answered only through the construction of a new mass antiwar movement based on the struggle for the unification of the international working class in the struggle against capitalism.

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