

Russia Always Cheats on Arms Treaties

Since 1963's nuclear Test Ban Treaty, Moscow's policy seems to be comply if convenient, otherwise violate.

By Keith B. Payne And Mark B. Schneider

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On July 29, the Obama administration announced that Russia has violated its obligation under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty "not to possess, produce or flight test a ground-launched cruise missile with a range capability of 500 to 5,500 kilometers; or to possess or produce launchers of such missiles." The administration's sudden candor is welcome. Yet its new compliance report alleging that the Russians tested a missile prohibited under the INF treaty—doesn't address other apparent treaty violations.

The INF violation fits into a long pattern of Soviet-Russian misbehavior that can only be described as "compliance if convenient." Moscow appears to observe arms-control commitments when convenient but violates them when not. This contrasts sharply with America's scrupulous adherence to the letter and often the supposed "spirit" of treaty commitments, long after Moscow has ceased to do so.

Unclassified presidential and State Department reports have documented Moscow's violation of all the major arms-control agreements, particularly those limiting nuclear arms and testing. Moscow violated the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty shortly after it came into force, when Soviet nuclear tests vented radioactive debris beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union. Washington did not publicly address most treaty violations. Over time the U.S. appears rarely to have threatened any real consequences for Moscow's noncompliance—perhaps helping to explain why Russia violates treaties with such abandon.

One exception was President Reagan, who presented a refreshingly realistic take in 1982: "Simply collecting agreements will not bring peace. Agreements genuinely reinforce peace only when they are kept. Otherwise, we are building a paper castle that will be blown away by the winds of war." Reagan followed up with annual reports that depicted the scope and significance of Soviet violations.



In 1985 the Reagan administration reported that the Soviet Union constructed a large missile-tracking radar in violation of the ABM Treaty and produced and used biological weapons in violations of the Biological Weapons Convention. It also noted violations of the Geneva Protocol on Chemical Weapons and likely violations of the Threshold Test Ban Treaty.

Similar candor continued through the George H.W. Bush administration. The Clinton administration's 1998

unclassified compliance report did call out Russia's possible maintenance of its capability to produce biological weapons. But the administration was largely silent about the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (Start).

President George W. Bush's 2005 compliance report documented five major violations of Start's verification provisions. Russia illegally prevented the U.S. from accurately counting the number of warheads on Russian ballistic missiles during treaty-mandated inspections, and it illegally based SS-25 mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles outside treaty-required areas.

With the exception of its recent INF report, the Obama administration has largely been silent on Russian compliance. At best its unclassified compliance reports note that "issues" have arisen but provide no specific information. Meanwhile, open, primarily Russian sources have pointed to other possible undisclosed Russian violations of the INF Treaty, Start-I and nuclear-testing restrictions. This includes the deployment of prohibited cruise missiles and three reported violations relating to intermediate-range ground-launched ballistic missiles.

There have also been reports through open sources of Moscow's failure for several years to dismantle the Start Treaty's required number of SS-18 heavy ICBMs; the illegal placing of multiple warheads on the SS-27 ICBM; and Moscow's covert, low-yield nuclear testing (so-called hydronuclear testing).

These Russian violations are not trivial matters. The House of Representatives recently declared on a bipartisan basis that the INF violation "poses a threat to the United States, its deployed forces, and its allies." According to senior Obama administration officials, Russia probably has a 10:1 numerical superiority over the U.S. in battlefield nuclear weapons. This Russian tactical nuclear arsenal, according to Russian press reports, includes weapons that are inconsistent with Soviet and Russian commitments made as part of the 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives to eliminate nuclear artillery and short-range nuclear-missile warheads. That 10:1 superiority may increase if Russia's INF treaty violations stand.

Washington's long periods of silence about cheating are sometimes justified as "quiet diplomacy" designed to bring about Moscow's compliance. Perhaps. But quiet diplomacy did not persuade Moscow in 1991 to stop building the enormous radar prohibited by the ABM Treaty. Rather, it was the George H.W. Bush administration's public threat to call out Russia's behavior as a "material breach."

Russian leaders such as Vladimir Putin appear to read U.S. silence as weakness and timidity, a perception which undoubtedly feeds their arms-control lawlessness. Pretending that Russia is a reliable arms-control partner helps to ensure that it is not. Calling Russia out for misbehavior may hold some hope of moving it into compliance.

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