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No More US-Russian Arms Treaties Until Moscow Stops Violating Existing Treaties and Agreements

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In the now-famous telephone conversation between President Trump and Russian President Putin, the Russian leader may or may not have raised the possibility of extending the existing New START nuclear agreement. What Putin certainly did not raise was Russia's continued non-compliance with a host of arms control and other treaties and agreements Moscow has signed. Russia today stands in violation of multiple agreements, including two directly involved in limiting or reducing nuclear weapons.

For example, in 2014 the US Government publicly charged Russia with violating the INF Treaty, after many years of apparent Russian non-compliance. That treaty, signed in 1987 by Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, eliminated an entire class of mid-range nuclear weapons systems and is commonly regarded as one of the foundational treaties of the current arms control regime. While Moscow has continually denied this US charge of noncompliance, the most recent reports are that Russia has covertly developed, tested, and now deployed a new mid-range nuclear-capable ground launched cruise missile, a clear violation of the Treaty's central limits.



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Russia is also violating the 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) signed by President George H.W. Bush and by Gorbachev, and, later endorsed again by Bush and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. These initiatives are political commitments by the United States and Russia and have never been rescinded. The United States has complied strictly with the PNIs, destroying the vast majority of its shorter-range nuclear weapons systems. Russia, however, not only maintains and modernizes its bloated arsenal of thousands of such weapons (said by US officials to be ten times more than that retained by the US), but violates those commitments according to open Russian sources by deploying nuclear-tipped cruise missiles aboard submarines and by retaining (and upgrading) short-range ground launched nuclear-capable ballistic missiles.

Beyond the two nuclear-focused agreements described above, Russia is either violating or not in full compliance with many other international agreements. For example, Russia signed the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997, but only after developing and producing a new type of chemical weapon (the fourth generation “novachuk” system) which was designed to evade the treaty’s provisions. The US State Department states publicly that it “cannot certify Russia has met its obligations” under CWC.

Russia signed the Istanbul Accords in 1999, agreeing to remove all Russian military forces from all parts of Georgia and from the Moldovan province of Transdniester. Yet, Russian forces not only remain in parts of Georgia and Moldova today, but are supporting separatist elements which seek to break those regions away from the control of the central governments. In fact, following Russia’s short war against Georgia in 2008, it has effectively absorbed parts of that small country.

Russia signed the Budapest Agreement in 1999, guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Yet, in 2014 Russia first militarily occupied and then annexed Ukrainian territory, the Crimean Peninsula. And, Russia continues military operations in parts of eastern Ukraine in violation of the Budapest Agreement.

Russia also has signed the Helsinki Accords, articles 1,2,3,4, and 6 of which commit the signatories to respect international boundaries in Europe, not meddle in the internal affairs of other countries and to forgo the use of force to change those boundaries. Moscow is violating those commitments repeatedly, as the leaders in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will attest.

Russia is a member of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, a document which forbids nuclear testing but does not define precisely what constitutes a nuclear weapons test. The United States, which has not ratified the Treaty, nevertheless has ceased nuclear testing; Russia, taking advantage of the Treaty’s failure to define “zero yield,” apparently continued to carry out weapons test at extremely low yields.

Finally, Russia, for decades under Soviet leadership, and later under Russian leadership, maintained an extensive biological weapons program in violation of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) – while stoutly denying the existence of such a program until defectors revealed its scope and magnitude. It appears that the Soviet Union actually increased its biological weapons programs after signing the



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BWC. Considerable doubt exists whether that program was in fact dismantled under Yeltsin, as pledged, or whether it continues covertly today.

International agreements are intended to be honored by their signatories. That is the point of negotiating such agreements. When one party continually violates the treaties it has signed without penalty, it establishes a pattern that undercuts the value of treaties and discredits the entire practice of such diplomacy. Former President Obama rightly emphasized that, “Rules must be binding. Violations must be punished. Words must mean something.” Indeed, when one party violates treaties while the other party complies, the national security of the latter is endangered and its credibility is damaged. The Trump Administration would be ill-advised to seek to negotiate new arms control treaties with Moscow until the Russian Federation complies with the treaties it has signed and demonstrates that it is a worthy negotiating partner. To date, it has proven the opposite.

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