

IMF: Another treaty bites the dust

By GWYNNE DYER

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty died last Friday, but there won't be many mourners at the funeral. There should be.

The problem the INF was intended to solve, back when U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev signed it in 1987, was 'warning time'.

Bombers would take many hours to get from Russia to America or vice versa, and even intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) would take 30-35 minutes. That would at least give the commanders of nuclear forces on the side that didn't launch the surprise attack enough time to order a retaliatory strike before they died.

Whereas intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) based in Europe could reach the other side's capitals, command centres, airfields and missile launchers in 10 minutes: barely time to tuck your head between your knees and kiss your ass goodbye, as they used to say.

The IRBMs put everything on a hair-trigger. You had maybe five minutes to decide if you trusted the data from your radars or your satellite surveillance before you had to decide whether to launch your nuclear counter-strike. Which makes it all the weirder that the Russians took the lead in introducing IRBMs to Europe.

They were called SS-20s, and they put all the capitals of NATO's European members on 10 minutes' notice of extinction. However, Moscow would also have only 10 minutes' warning once the U.S. developed its own IRBMs and based them in Europe (they were called Pershing IIs).

But the United States is not in Europe, and only the Soviet Union's ICBMs could reach it. No matter what happened with IRBMs in Europe, the U.S. would still have a half-hour-plus warning time. The Russians were exceptionally foolish to start this particular bit of the arms race.

By the mid-1980s the Russians were looking for a way out, and Ronald Reagan, who hated nuclear weapons, was happy to help them. He and Gorbachev signed the INF treaty in 1987, banning all land-based ballistic missiles with 'intermediate range' (500-5,500km).

They also banned all land-based cruise missiles of similar range, although the relatively slow-moving cruise missiles never posed a 'warning time' problem. The INF Treaty was the first major sign that the Cold War was ending: 2,700 missiles were destroyed in the following two years, and everybody lived happily ever after. Sort of.

So why have they now just let the INF Treaty die?

The Russians have been fiddling around with an existing sea-launched cruise missile that has a range of several thousand km. That's legal at sea, but then they test-fired the same missile from a land-based mobile launcher. They kept that test below the INF-permitted limit of 500 km for land-based cruise missiles, but the test proved that it would work at any range.

Naughty and stupid, but boys will be boys. It's a cruise missile, so it has no impact on warning time, nor would it give Russia any strategic advantage. Why didn't Vladimir Putin not just stop the nonsense, and maybe apologise?

Same goes for the United States: the INF is good value, and the Russian infringement is legally questionable but strategically unimportant. Why haven't you taken the time to sort this out and keep the treaty alive?

The reason is China. All the arms control treaties of the later 20th century were made in a bipolar world: the United States and the Soviet Union were the only players who counted. Now China counts too, and arms control becomes a 'three-body problem'. Those are very hard problems to solve.

The sane answer is simply to deal the Chinese in. Beijing doesn't want to live with 10 minutes' warning time either. It would probably sign up to the INF terms provided that the U.S. and Russia were willing to grant it parity in other weapons. You could even throw in a new ban on 'hypersonic' missiles of intermediate range, which will be otherwise be threatening warning times in a few years.

But there are people in Washington, and no doubt in Moscow, who would love to have the option of a no-warning disarming strike on Beijing. You have to kill the INF to achieve that, because you would need to put land-based intermediate-range ballistic missiles on the ground in Asia. But those people have won the argument, because nobody else cares enough.

Former U.S. secretary of state George Shultz, who negotiated the INF Treaty, told the Voice of America recently: 'When something like the INF goes down the drain almost like nothing, it shows you the degree to which people have forgotten the power of these weapons. One day it'll be too late.'

It's 30 years since the Cold War ended, and the insiders in the American and Russian defence establishments who are letting the INF die are betraying our trust. New weapons, new strategies, new threats are the building blocks of their careers, and they have forgotten to be afraid of nuclear war.

So don't blame Donald Trump or John Bolton or Vladimir Putin, who are only doing their usual belligerent shtick. Blame the careerists, who should know better.