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THE CURRENT: Will the INF Treaty's demise kick-start a new arms race?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to "The Current," from the Brookings Podcast Network. In February, the Trump administration announced its intention to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty. As of Friday, August 2, the withdrawal is official, marking the end of a signature agreement credited with helping to end the Cold War between the United States and Russia.

With us today to discuss this is Frank Rose, a Senior Fellow here at Brookings and the former Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance. Frank, in recent years, the U.S. and Russia have regularly accused each other of violating the terms of the treaty. What factors led to the administration deciding to withdraw?

ROSE: Well, Adrianna, thanks for having me. The demise of the INF treaty is really part of a larger trend, and that is the demise of the U.S.-Russia strategic stability framework that came into effect at the end of the Cold War. The existing framework has not been able to adapt to the changing security situation in Eurasia, specifically the rise of new actors like China, and the emergence of new technologies like advanced cruise and ballistic missiles, anti-satellite weapons, and offensive cyber systems.

Indeed, Russia actually proposed in 2005 that the United States and Russia jointly withdraw from the treaty, arguing the treaty did nothing to constrain ballistic missiles by China, India, Pakistan, and other countries in Eurasia. Indeed, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which the United States withdrew from in 2001, had prevented the United States from deploying effective ballistic missile defenses against these emerging challenges, and that was the reason we exited the treaty back at the beginning of the previous decade. Bottom line, INF's demise is the part of a larger story. And that story is the decline of the framework. For arms control to play a role in helping us manage future challenges, future arms control agreements are going to need to be responsive to the changing security environment.

PITA: And how have U.S. allies, particularly NATO, reacted to this?

ROSE: The administration made some initial missteps. Quite frankly, even in the Obama administration, most allies understood and believed the U.S. assessment that Russia was in violation of the treaty. I spent a lot of my time as Assistant Secretary from 2014-2017 briefing allies on Russia's violations. In many ways, fundamentally, the whole INF issue was about alliance unity. Indeed, the reason

why the United States initially deployed the missiles in Europe in the late 1970s was at European request, to recouple U.S. and European security. It was not the United States who initially called for the deployment of ground-launched ballistic cruise missiles in Europe. So, I don't begrudge the administration for exiting the treaty. We had almost six years of diplomacy in both the Obama administration and the Trump administration to try and bring the Russians back into compliance. None of that diplomacy worked, and quite frankly, for a variety of strategic reasons, I don't think it ever would because I don't think Russia ever had any intention of coming back into compliance.

However, where this administration made a mistake was they failed to initially consult effectively with our allies. Indeed, I think the initial decision of the United States to exit the treaty was made by the president on the sidelines of a campaign rally in Nevada. And many allies, if not all, were taken by surprise. Now to its credit, the administration over the last few months has done a lot of clean-up work, and it appears that the allies are on board. Back in February, the NATO allies issued a statement saying they fully support the U.S. decision to withdraw from the treaty.

So in my view, the administration really has three big challenges now that the treaty is coming to an end: One, how do they continue to maintain alliance unity on this issue? Secondly, how do they maintain a level of stability with Russia in the near- to mid-term to make sure we don't have an unnecessary arms race? And thirdly, how do we develop a plan to transition us to a new framework for stability that includes new actors like China and emerging technologies like anti-satellite weapons and offensive cyber capabilities? I think it's an open question as to whether the administration will be able to accomplish these three goals.

PITA: That near- to mid-term question was a big one for me. Basically, on Monday or a week from now, what happens once the treaty is over? How quickly could a new arms race...is that at risk of getting kicked off?

ROSE: You know, it really depends. The United States currently does not have a ground-launch cruise missile capability, but we could develop one relatively quickly. The question is, should the United States move forward with the deployment of ground launch cruise missiles in Europe and Asia? Now, don't get me wrong, there are military reasons why deploying such capabilities could improve U.S. and alliance military options and help deter potential threats from Russia and China. However, there are potential downsides. First and foremost, it's very difficult to deploy offensive cruise and ballistic missiles in democratic countries. The decision to deploy missiles in Europe in the 1970s and 80s was very politically controversial, and in many ways almost broke the NATO alliance. The recent decision to deploy the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense Missile System in Republic of Korea was very, very controversial. We eventually moved forward with the deployment, but it wasn't easy. Secondly, do you really need ground launch cruise missiles to achieve your military and deterrence objectives? I would argue is that we could probably meet all our military requirements with air and sea-launch capabilities, which are currently deployed on U.S. air craft and ships around the world.

So, my recommendation to the administration is, take your time and get this right. What I mean by that is, you need to have serious consultation with allies before you make any political decision to move forward with ground-launched cruise missiles or ballistic missiles in Europe or Asia. Secondly, before you go down that road, you should look at other military alternatives that can help us meet military requirements that we may have. In my view, the real focus should be on air and sea-launch capabilities. I do not disagree with the administration that Russian and Chinese ballistic and cruise missile capabilities are a threat to the United States and our allies around the world, but I am thoroughly convinced that we can meet those threats with other capabilities and we don't necessarily need to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles or ground launch ballistic ballistic missiles in Asia and the Pacific to deter Russia and China.

PITA: Alright. Frank, thank you very much for being here and explaining this today.

ROSE: It's great to be with you. Thanks again.