

CRS Insights

Russia's Compliance with the INF Treaty
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The Obama Administration, in its recently released 2014 [report on arms control compliance](#), has stated that Russia has violated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Specifically, the Administration claims that Russia has tested a [land-based cruise missile](#) with a range greater than 500 kilometers. The United States has raised its concerns with Russia several times over the past year, including in a meeting that occurred in Moscow on September 11, 2014. While the State Department [reports](#) that the two sides had a "useful exchange of views," Russia's response did not "assuage" U.S. concerns. Russia, for its part, [claimed](#) that the United States did not offer any details to back up its accusation and failed to address Russian concerns about U.S. compliance with the treaty.

The INF Treaty

On December 8, 1987, the United States and Soviet Union signed the [INF Treaty](#), which mandated the elimination of all land-based intermediate-range and shorter-range ballistic missiles and ground-launched cruise missiles. These are missiles with a range of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers (300 and 3,400 miles). It also barred both sides from producing or flight-testing new land-based intermediate-range missiles in the future. The United States and Soviet Union eliminated their INF missiles by the end of 1991. The treaty is of unlimited duration, so the ban on new types of INF systems remains in place.

The INF Treaty defines the range of a ground-launched ballistic missile as "the maximum range to which it has been tested." Neither the INF Treaty nor the New START Treaty, which limits missiles with ranges longer than 5,500 kilometers, bars tests of missiles to less than their maximum range. Therefore, a missile tested to a range greater than 5,500 kilometers would not fall under the INF Treaty, even if it flew to less than 5,500 kilometers in subsequent tests.

The range of a ground-launched cruise missile is "the maximum distance which can be covered by the missile in its standard design mode flying until fuel exhaustion, determined by projecting its flight path onto the earth's sphere from the point of launch to the point of impact." This definition is more complicated than the one for ballistic missiles because cruise missiles do not fly on a predictable trajectory, can change direction in flight, and can fly to less than their maximum distance. Moreover, the maximum range to fuel exhaustion can depend on the altitude and path of the flight.

U.S. Concerns with Russia's Compliance

The 2014 compliance report does not offer any details about the offending Russian cruise missile or cite the evidence that the United States used to make its determination. The Administration has, however, indicated that the missile was first tested in 2008 and, although tests have continued, has not yet been deployed. Contrary to [much of the speculation](#) in the press, several [reports](#) argue that the missile is not the R-500 Iskander cruise missile, which began testing in 2007 and has already been deployed, but another missile that may be derived from a Russian sea-launched [cruise missile](#).

Russian Interests

Russian officials have occasionally threatened to withdraw from the INF Treaty in response to activities that it finds threatening to its security, like the deployment of U.S. ballistic missile defenses in Europe. Some [speculate](#) that Russia may want to develop an intermediate-range missile capability to offset perceived threats from the growing capabilities of China's missiles. Russia might also see these missiles as a response to challenges from NATO enlargement and NATO's advanced conventional capabilities. Russia may eventually withdraw from the INF Treaty to meet perceived needs. Alternatively, it could

continue to pursue its current course and hope that the United States withdraws from the treaty and frees Russia from existing limits.

U.S. Options

The Obama Administration has indicated it will continue to pursue compliance issues with Russia and raise questions about the new missile. It has not outlined steps that it might take if Russia fails to address U.S. concerns.

Some have [suggested](#) that the United States adopt a more forceful [response](#) that clearly demonstrates its concerns with Russia's activities. For example, the United States could declare that Russia has committed a material breach of the treaty—essentially stating that Russia's actions represent a willful evasion of the treaty's central limits. The United States could then withdraw from INF, both as a reaction to Russia's missile program and so that it could deploy its own missiles of INF range. Some have also suggested that the United States suspend other areas of cooperation with Russia and, possibly, withdraw from the New START Treaty.

Others support a more restrained response. They [note](#) that, if the United States withdrew from INF, Russia could deploy enough new INF-range cruise and ballistic missiles to create significant security concerns for U.S. allies in Europe and Asia. They believe the United States should continue to engage with Russia to reach an agreement that might limit or eliminate the new missile program. Still others [support](#) U.S. research into new military capabilities that could both counter the potential threat from the new Russian missiles and address any defense needs left unmet by U.S. compliance with the INF Treaty. If such a program would violate the INF Treaty, then the United States could announce its own withdrawal.

Most experts agree that the U.S. response to Russia's activities should take into consideration the allies who would be threatened by Russia's INF missiles. Most experts doubt that U.S. allies in Europe would request the return of U.S. nuclear-armed missiles to Europe. This would require a consensus within NATO, and it seems unlikely, given the anti-nuclear and pro-disarmament views in some of the allies' capitals, that this would be possible. Some also doubt that the allies would support U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty, as this would leave Russia's missile force unhindered. Further, the allies may consider existing or new air-delivered or sea-based systems to be an effective response.