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Russian Withdrawal from INF Treaty Will Put the Ball in Europe's Court

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In a February 10 speech in Munich, Russian President Vladimir Putin intimated that Russia may withdraw from the 1987 Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles.¹ This agreement, frequently referred to as the INF Treaty, required the U.S. and the Soviet Union to eliminate an entire class of nuclear-capable ground-based ballistic and cruise missiles. Russia agreed to participate in the treaty following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian General Yuri Baluyevsky made a more direct statement regarding the Russian option to withdraw on February 15 in Moscow.² Russia will be well within its rights if it decides to withdraw. The U.S. will not be in position, either legally or politically, to block Russia from taking this step.

A Cold War Crisis Revisited. A Russian decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty would be directed more at Europe than at the U.S. This is because INF missiles deployed in Russia could pose a threat to targets in Europe, not the U.S. Russia's political aim now is effectively equivalent to that of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, with the Soviet deployment of the INF missiles of that era. It is to intimidate European states into severing their security ties with the U.S. under NATO.

So how will the Europeans respond? During the Cold War, they strengthened their ties to the U.S., withstood Soviet threats and Soviet-induced domestic protests, and agreed to the deployment of corresponding INF missiles in Western Europe. The

conclusion of the INF Treaty and the elimination of all the relevant missiles marked the failure of the Soviet attempt to split NATO.

Now, as then, the alternative path is also available to the Europeans. The alternative is capitulation to Russia's threat in the form of distancing themselves from the U.S. What is different now, however, is the promise of a unified Europe. Some Europeans may believe that a unified Europe will provide adequate strength to counter this new variation of the Russian threat, absent U.S. participation. If that is so, it is only in the abstract. At the moment, Europe has neither the political cohesion nor an adequate commitment to military readiness to confront alone an aggressive Russia that possesses a new class of INF missiles.

The Europeans will also be tempted to believe that a new class of INF missiles fielded by Russia is not aimed at them. Fortunately, the withdrawal procedures under the INF Treaty will force the Russians to declare themselves in this regard. The treaty requires the Russians to identify what extraordinary events related to the subject of the treaty have jeopardized Russia's supreme interests so as to justify withdrawal. Both Putin and Baluyevsky have indi-

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cated that Russia will point to the prospective deployment of missile defense systems in Europe as the justification. If the Russians justify withdrawal on this basis, they will leave no doubt that Europe is the target of the new missiles, and they will have stated that any attempt by Europe to defend itself with non-threatening, purely defensive systems is an inherent threat to Russia. In short, Russia apparently feels that its supreme interests depend on having an unfettered means to attack Europe.

A Renewed Commitment to Transatlantic Security. Sensible Europeans will wonder how they arrived in this predicament. Ironically for the Europeans, Putin himself provided the answer at the end of his speech in Munich when he stated, “We very often—and personally, I very often—hear appeals by our partners, including our European partners,

to the effect that Russia should play an increasingly active role in world affairs.”³ Putin is referring to quiet, and not so quiet, remonstrations from Europeans about the need to counterbalance U.S. power. The Europeans may well now be getting what they asked for from Russia.

If Russia uses a new class of INF missiles to counterbalance the power of the U.S. by holding Europe hostage to nuclear attack, Europeans should reconsider their remonstrations to Russia that it needs to act against the United States.

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1. “Putin’s Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy, February 10, 2007” (as translated), *The Washington Post*, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html (February 12, 2007).
2. “Russia Warns U.S. of Arms Treaty Pullout,” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2007, p. A-20.
3. “Putin’s Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy, February 10, 2007” (as translated), *The Washington Post*.