

Comments by British Pugwash Chair, Peter Jenkins, about his recent trip to Russia as part of a Pugwash delegation to discuss arms control
These comments were made at the SYP UK Annual Conference, 23rd February 2019

The most natural starting-point for what I have to offer this morning may be an account of what the Secretary General (SG) of Pugwash, a German colleague and I learned in Moscow on 28 January. Pugwash's Geneva director, a Russian, had set up meetings for us with Russia's Foreign Minister and the appropriate deputy minister, but was prevented by illness, regrettably, from accompanying us.

Discussion at both meetings focused largely on US/Russian nuclear arms control. Our hosts' objective, not surprisingly, was to convince us that Russia had not breached the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INFT) and that, if the treaty collapsed, which they expected, the fault would lie at the door of the United States.

The essence of their case was that the cruise missile which the United States believes to have been tested at ranges in excess of 2000 km has a maximum range of 480 km, just below the INFT threshold of 500 km. This missile, known in Russia as the 9M729, is a variant, they said, of the 9M728, also known as the Iskander-M, which has a maximum range of 490 km. The 729 is heavier than the 728, because of an improved on-board guidance system, but the fuel capacity is the same; so the maximum range is slightly shorter.

They were equally intent on spelling out the reasons they have for believing that the United States is in breach of the INFT. They cited the Aegis Ashore launchers in Romania and, in the near future, Poland, which are capable of launching both ballistic interceptors and Tomahawk cruise missiles (the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has recently corroborated this claim), heavy drones, and certain ballistic interceptors that have been in use in missile defence system tests.

They regretted that so far the United States had rejected a Russian proposal for reciprocal steps to resolve compliance concerns, e.g. reciprocal inspections of the 729 variant of the Iskander-M and of the Aegis Ashore launchers in Romania and Poland. Instead the United States was insisting on Russian destruction of all 729's under U.S. supervision, and 3-monthly U.S. inspection visits to the 729 production plant.

U.S. rejection of the Russian reciprocal inspection proposal had not come as a surprise, they said, since during a visit to Moscow in October the U.S. National Security Adviser had spoken of the INFT's demise as inevitable, stressing that the U.S. government had decided to do away with the treaty and that he had come to inform, not to bargain or negotiate. It was not concern about Russian actions that had brought about the US decision to kill off the treaty, he had said, but a desire to have a free hand to react to Chinese, North Korean and Iranian missile threats in whatever way the United States judged best.

Lastly, before turning to the strategic dimension, they underlined that, if the INFT collapses, Russia will not be the first to deploy to the European theatre (or in any other theatre) missiles banned by that treaty

They then urged us to be in no doubt as to Russia's wish to preserve New START, to extend it beyond February 2021 and to build on it through further reductions in strategic nuclear weapon systems and deployed warheads after 2026. This is official policy, they said. Past Russian voices to the contrary should be ignored. All Russian systems could be on the table.

At the same time, they wanted us to be aware of a Russian compliance concern. New START binds both parties to "irreversible convertibility" of weapon systems withdrawn from service to bring the number of systems remaining in service below agreed numerical ceilings. The Russian concern relates to 56 submarine ballistic missile (BM) tubes and 41 B52 bombers. In their view these systems have not been subjected to irreversible modifications and could quickly be brought back into service, making possible the delivery of an additional 1280 warheads.

They emphasized that they are anxious for a healthy strategic dialogue with U.S. counterparts but had little reason to believe that this wish was reciprocated. At U.S. request, they had made proposals for specific agenda items for a strategic dialogue meeting; these had been unanswered. Equally without response was a Russian proposal to repeat a past joint statement about the inadmissibility of nuclear war.

They feared demise of the INFT would cast a long shadow over the 2020 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon). Continuing U.S. objections to progress on the 1995 Middle East WMD free zone proposal and continuing U.S. non-ratification of the 1996 nuclear test ban treaty (CTBT) would be aggravating factors.

Having given you this account, which I need hardly tell you, may not correspond with objective reality in all respects - for instance, the Americans believe that the 729 is a variant of the 2000-plus km Kalibr sea-launched cruise missile, not of the short-range 9M728 Iskander-M - perhaps I should now try to offer you a personal assessment of the outlook for nuclear arms control and non-proliferation.

I am tempted to think that, if John Bolton says that the demise of the INFT is inevitable - that part of what we heard on 28 January seems entirely credible - then it is inevitable, because he is well-placed to deliver on his prediction. But last week a retired U.S. ambassador to Moscow urged me not to abandon hope. He saw promise in the Russian proposal for reciprocal inspections of the 729 missile and Aegis Ashore launchers, and he urged that Europe press Washington, by which I think he meant both the administration and Congress, especially the Democrat majority in the House, to agree to reciprocal inspections.

The following day I read that NATO's SG had told NBC News that, although NATO is planning for a world without the INFT, and with more Russian missiles in Europe, its first priority is to save the treaty.

If, nonetheless, the 2 February deadline passes with the treaty unsaved, what then?

I do not share the NATO SG's apparent certainty (if this is what he had in mind) that Russia will start deploying ground-launched intermediate range missiles on its European flank. On the contrary, I am inclined to take at face value the assurance we received on 28 January, which has been repeated publicly, for instance by President Vladimir Putin on 20 February, that Russia will not be the first to deploy to the European theatre missiles banned by the INFT.

This suggests to me that Europe should make clear to Washington that it does not want the United States to be the first to deploy INFT-banned missiles in Europe and would like the United States to consider the option of a NATO/Russian joint declaration on non-first deployment, as a confidence-building measure.

Also to build confidence there could be merit in NATO and Russia exchanging information about existing ground-based non-strategic missile deployments in Europe, and individual missile capabilities, directly or via an impartial non-governmental institution.

In other words, Europe must strive to avert the destabilising effect of reciprocal intermediate range ground-launched deployments, the risk being great that such deployments would create temporary imbalances and might lead to circumstances in which Russian decision-makers, believing essential Russian command-and-control centres and/or strategic nuclear assets to be at risk from an intermediate range NATO first strike, opted for a Russian intermediate or strategic first strike.

Of course, a pressing problem is that the 729 missile has been deployed west of the Urals and NATO is sure that it is an intermediate missile. This can create pressure for a countervailing NATO intermediate deployment. But there is an obvious alternative: for the United States to render its European Aegis Ashore launchers irreversibly incapable of launching Tomahawks in return for permanent Russian withdrawal of all 729s from the European theatre. I sometimes wonder whether this trade-off has been the Russian goal all along.

The deployment of INFT-banned systems would be all the more destabilising if one or more of those systems were hypersonic. The US Advanced Hypersonic Weapon (AHW), for instance, which seems to be the US hypersonic system that is most likely to become deployable in the next few years, is thought to have a maximum range of 6000 km and to be capable of a speed in excess of Mach 8. This means that an AHW launched from East Anglia could reach Moscow 14-15 minutes later. Its deployment would probably prompt Russia to deploy the 1000 km Mach 9 hypersonic missile of which President Putin spoke on 20 February. This is not the stuff that stable European security is made of!

Incidentally, I believe I am right in saying that Russian arms control experts look back on the deployment to the European theatre at the end of the 1970s of intermediate nuclear-armed SS20 BMs as a mistake. That deployment led to U.S. counter-deployments of nuclear-armed ballistic and cruise missiles, and to a crisis in the autumn of 1983 when Moscow feared a NATO intermediate first strike to be imminent and came close to resolving to be the first to strike.

What about prospects at the strategic level? People who are familiar with U.S. debates say that any hope of extending New START in early 2021 will evaporate if the INFT is killed off. I don't myself understand why that need be so. I prefer to focus on the assurances we received on 28 January that Russia sees an extension as desirable, and on reasons why an extension would seem to be in Russia's interest. An extension would keep out of service those 56 submarine BM tubes and 41 B52s that Moscow believes could quickly be brought back into service if New START were to expire. And a strategic arms race would be very expensive; Moscow knows that from bitter experience.

In any case, that Europe should do all it can to ensure that New START is extended, irrespective of whether the INFT can be saved, seems to me a no-brainer.

What are the implications of all this for the 2020 NPT RevCon? They are not good. A large majority of NPT parties will see the demise of the INFT as further evidence of Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) back-sliding in relation to what they view as a firm NWS commitment, via Article VI of the NPT, to do away with nuclear weapons. They are utterly fed up with the United States and its European allies trying to strengthen the non-proliferation provisions of the NPT while signalling through their decisions and actions that nuclear weapons are an essential source of U.S. and European security. It's already more than bad enough, in the eyes of most NPT parties, that all five NWS have embarked on the modernisation of their nuclear forces and manifest no interest whatsoever in moving towards Global Zero, while four of them have taken to attacking the 2018 Nuclear Ban Treaty, and two of them have yet to ratify the 1996 CTBT.

If there is a silver lining to all of this prospective frustration and anger, it is that it furnishes Europe with an additional argument against the deployment of missiles banned by the INFT, and in favour of extending New START.

Whether such an argument will cut any ice in Washington under the present administration is moot, of course. U.S. officials can argue back that NPT non-nuclear weapon state parties have come to understand that it is in their interest to preserve the NPT, whether or not the NWS honour their part of the 1968 NPT bargain. I think that has to be seen as a fair point. Nonetheless, I hope Europe will exploit the approach of the 2020 RevCon when making the case for New START extension, no INF range ground-launched deployments in Europe and a NATO/Russian no-first deployment declaration.