

Luis V. Pérez Gil

Doctor of Law, Professor in the Department of Constitutional Law, University of La Laguna (Spain)

E-mail: lvperezg@ull.es

The breakdown of the system of strategic stability and possible scenarios for the future

Abstract

In this paper, we argue that the international system has undergone a complete transformation in a few short years and that the possibility of its complete destruction has increased several hundredfold during this time. Consequently, it seems fitting to reflect upon an issue that has been raised on more than one occasion: Is a third world war imminent? Has decision-making reached the point of no return? The phrase, «no, it cannot be», has changed to «yes, it can, if we believe we have something to gain». These are the devastating consequences of ignorance, disdain for diplomacy, a false superiority complex and, most especially, the suicidal tendency that humanity as a whole has been cultivating since the beginning of time. The huge advances in technology can be envisaged alongside extinction because, in reality, some will survive on a dead planet. This may be the end of civilisation as we know it and the dawn of a new civilisation in a different world. These are hard questions to ask. But we ask them nevertheless. Even though we have no clear answers.

Keywords

Global security, strategic stability, arms control, INF Treaty, nuclear weapons.

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Introduction

«Dedicated to my teacher, eladio arroyo lara, professor of public international law and international relations».

In this paper, we assess the implications for the international system of the withdrawal of the United States and Russia from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), signed in Washington on 8 October 1987 by President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev and ratified on 1 June 1988¹. To this end, we will examine what disarmament treaties and cooperation mechanisms introduced at the end of the Cold War are still in force, and whether these are likely to remain in place or be dismantled in their entirety, a move which would jeopardise the system of strategic stability that has thus far ensured peace and security between the two great nuclear powers. In our study, we analyse the approaches taken by the U. S. and Russia based on the statements made by their most senior political and military representatives. Before doing so, however, we should clarify that by strategic stability we mean the balance of power within which neither party can gain a strategic advantage at the expense of the other, i.e. a situation where neither party would have an incentive to use nuclear weapons first because they have no guarantee that they will emerge from the conflict the victor.

From a Western perspective, we will examine the stance of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), which advocates taking some sort of action but fails to specify what exactly, given that the organisation is subordinate to the political hegemony of the U.S. and its security interests. In addition, we will look at the standpoint of the European Union, which demonstrates Europe's inability to take a common stance on such an important issue for European security, despite repeated calls for strategic autonomy.

In the final considerations, we examine three scenarios for the near future. The first is to let each power do as they please, in which case we can expect to see a new nuclear arms race in Europe, along the lines of the Soviet/U.S. conflict of the 1980s, which led to the deployment of the so-called *Euromissile*. The second scenario involves the negotiation and signing of a new general treaty covering all nuclear weapons, both strategic and non-strategic, in the hands of the two great powers. This would include the permanent renewal of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), signed in Prague on 8 April 2010 between presidents Obama and Medvedev, which entered into force on 5 February 2011². The third is the most hypothetical of the three scenarios; it envisages the two major powers in the European Union –France and Germany– becoming aware of the interests currently at stake in the area of security and being

¹ The text of the INF Treaty is available at the U.S. Department of State website: <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>.

² The text of the New START Treaty is available at the official website of the U.S. Department of State: <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/126118.htm>.

capable of progressing towards the establishment of an intra-European nuclear control system, which would form the basis of a new European security system within the global strategic stability regime.

The dangerous rhetoric of a nuclear attack and preemptive strike

In early October 2018, the U.S. Ambassador to NATO, Kay Bailey Hutchison, stated that Russia must halt its covert development of a banned cruise missile system or the United States would seek to destroy it before it became operational. The statement, aside from being surprising coming from a senior diplomat, was also extremely worrying and, indeed, led to quite a powerful newspaper headline: «U.S. would destroy banned Russian warheads if necessary»³. Although the article did go on to state that Washington remained committed to finding a diplomatic solution, it nevertheless spoke of the possibility of launching a preemptive strike against Russian military forces and facilities. Almost immediately, Ambassador Hutchison tweeted from her official account –let us not forget that Twitter has become the oracle of the «New Era»– to clarify that, when she made this statement, she was not talking about a preemptive strike against Russia⁴; however, she had threatened to destroy Russian cruise missiles, which is the same thing. The development of a particular cruise missile had been repeatedly denounced as a violation of the INF Treaty by U.S. officials. We must remember that the Treaty laid down the general prohibition to produce, possess, store or deploy ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500–5,000 kilometres, and resulted in the elimination of a total of 2,692 nuclear and conventional ground-launched missile systems by the U.S. and Russia before the entry into force of the Treaty in May 1992.

In addition, Ambassador Hutchison went on to clarify that what she actually meant was «Russia needs to return to INF Treaty compliance or we will need to match its capabilities to protect US & NATO interests»⁵. Yet this is precisely what senior officials in Moscow had accused the U.S. of doing: developing new missile capabilities contrary to the provisions of the disarmament treaties.

A flurry of statements by senior politicians ensued. The Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, stated that «We remain concerned about Russia's lack of respect for its international commitments, including the INF Treaty. [...] After years of denials, Russia recently acknowledged the existence of a new missile system, called 9M729. Russia has not provided any credible answers on this new

³ EMMOTT, R. «U.S. would destroy banned Russian warheads if necessary: NATO envoy». *Reuters*, 2. October 2018, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nuclear-russia/u-s-would-destroy-banned-russian-warheads-if-necessary-nato-envoy-idUSKCN1MC1J6>.

⁴ Available at <https://twitter.com/USAmbNATO/status/1047203183964160001>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

missile»⁶, before going on to add that «All Allies agree that the most plausible assessment would be that Russia is in violation of the Treaty. It is therefore urgent that Russia addresses these concerns in a substantial and transparent manner»⁷. And we will see how these statements became the mantra of advocates for withdrawal from the treaty on both sides of the Atlantic.

It should be clarified that the missile the Western officials speak of is the Novator 9M729 cruise missile (NATO equivalent: SSC-8). This missile is a ground-launched variant of the 3M14 Kalibr missile (NATO: SS-N-30A Sagaris), which was extensively tested in the Syrian Civil War, and adapted to the short-range, nuclear-capable ballistic missile system Iskander-M. Russia has twelve of these missiles deployed throughout its territory, including the Kaliningrad region. A variant of this missile, possibly the 3M728, was tested in a real launch during the «Zapad-2017» exercises performed in Russia's Western Military District in September 2017, very close to the border with the Baltic republics.

However, we need to go further back in time. In October 2016, the Chairman of the Defence Committee of the Russian State Duma, Vladimir Shamanov, stated that the deployment of the Iskander-M system in Kaliningrad was a response to the potential threat posed to Russia by the installation of U.S. anti-missile defence systems in Europe, specifically in Deveselu in Romania, and subsequently in Poland, which have gone from being former allies of the Soviet Bloc to becoming territories from which NATO can pressure Russia⁸.

Not surprisingly, Russia has repeatedly denied these accusations, arguing that it has not developed missiles that violate the INF Treaty⁹, even though it is a fact that the congested Syrian skies are ablaze with Russian cruise missiles intended to destroy valuable terrorist targets. In an official statement made in response to Ambassador Hutchison's statements, the spokesperson for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakhárova, had no hesitation in pointing out that «It seems that people who make such statements do not realize the level of their responsibility and the danger of aggressive rhetoric»¹⁰.

6 Indeed, the statements were quickly echoed by Russia in the article «Stoltenberg pide cuentas a Rusia sobre el cumplimiento del Tratado INF» (Stoltenberg holds Russia to account over compliance with INF Treaty), published on *Sputnik* on 2 October 2018, at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/defensa/201810021082413114-rusia-otan-tratado-inf/> (Also available in English at <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201810021068510454-stoltenberg-press-conference/>).

7 Ibid.

8 Shamanov's statements were published in *V Gosdume raskryli tseli perebroski «Iskanderov» pod Kaliningrad*, *Lenta.ru* on 15 October 2016, at <https://lenta.ru/news/2016/10/15/shaman/>.

9 By way of example, we can quote Russian Deputy Minister of Defence, General Alexander Fomin, in «Defensa rusa asegura que Rusia cumple a rajatabla el Tratado INF sobre misiles», *Sputnik*. 14 August 2018, at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/defensa/201808141081194585-rusia-no-viola-tratado-inf/>.

10 Quoted from «Estados Unidos promete destruir los misiles de crucero rusos que supuestamente violan el tratado INF». *RT*. 2 October 2018, at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/290597-eeuu->

However, what Ambassador Hutchison actually said was that «At that point, we would be looking at the capability to take out a (Russian) missile that could hit any of our countries»¹¹. Was she referring to taking anticipatory measures involving the use of force and, therefore, of an extremely serious nature or was she somewhat crudely suggesting talks intended to bring about a new framework of relations that would leave the U.S. and Russia free to develop new short- and medium-range cruise missiles without the current legal restrictions?

Whatever the case, it is shocking to see senior foreign and security officials from the world's most powerful nations play around with such dangerous concepts: in this case, preemptive war, as if such a war could be won against a nuclear superpower.

During the Cold War, Western strategists raised the theoretical possibility of launching a limited nuclear attack against the Soviet Union, which was documented in the Strategy of Flexible Response adopted by NATO in 1968. They believed that if an aggressor had reason to believe that an attack could trigger a nuclear response where there is a risk of uncontrollable escalation, it would be impossible to anticipate the cost of the devastation caused, or, in other words, the probability of suffering unacceptable damage. The next step was taken in 1980 when the Carter Administration adopted the counterweight strategy, which involved plans to wage and win a nuclear war in a politically acceptable manner. This envisaged the possibility of waging a limited nuclear attack on the assumption that, in the event of confrontation between great powers, they would exercise mutual self-restraint in order to avoid it escalating into a nuclear war. From a technical perspective, a war of this kind would only be possible using low-yield nuclear warheads, also known as mini nukes, thus, in principle, ruling out the use of thermonuclear weapons, which would be relegated to the role of strategic deterrence, counter-strike or second-use. In this scenario, low-yield nuclear warheads would serve the purpose of sub-strategic deterrence.

However, Soviet leaders and strategists never accepted this approach. As far as they were concerned, a nuclear attack meant confrontation with every nuclear weapon at their disposal and, therefore, that nuclear war necessarily entailed mutual assured destruction. In other words, never start a war unless you are absolutely sure you will emerge the outright victor. And Russia continues to embrace this doctrine when it comes to the use of nuclear weapons, as evidenced by President Putin's emphatic statements at the Valdai Forum in Sochi on 18 October 2018: «there is no provision for a pre-emptive strike in our nuclear weapons doctrine. [...] But then any aggressor should know that retaliation is inevitable and they will be annihilated»¹².

amenazar-destruir-misiles-rusos-prohibidos (Also available in English at <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201810021068510454-stoltenberg-press-conference/>).

¹¹ At <https://twitter.com/USAmbNATO/status/1047203183964160001>.

¹² Quoted from *RT*. 19 October 2019, at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/292593-putin-discurso-foro-valdai>.

Based on this reasoning, most political scientists believe that the world is a safer place if the leaders of the great powers espouse the conviction that a nuclear war can never be limited, and this way of thinking strengthens deterrence. Indeed, this explains the rationale behind the INF Treaty and the strategic arms reduction treaties that culminated in the New START Treaty.

Nevertheless, in this new stage of international relations, the great nuclear powers, including France and the United Kingdom, are still toying with the idea of attacking non-strategic targets with low-yield nuclear warheads and, more recently, with short and medium-range cruise missiles equipped with high-explosive non-nuclear warheads as well. This significantly complicates the functioning of deterrence and seriously jeopardises global security because, if conventional military action by an adversary is mistaken for a nuclear strike, it could trigger the mechanisms of complete destruction.

Can we, therefore, at this point, consider another world war likely? Up until now, we believed that the atomic bomb and the threat of nuclear war were the rational limits of violence and that no one would intentionally condemn hundreds of thousands, even millions of people to total annihilation and, most especially, the irreversible destruction of the environment in which they live. This is the rational limit; an absolute limit to all kinds of wars, with the corollary that those who have nuclear weapons will be safe (the case of North Korea) and, therefore, that peace is necessary and possible. However, is this true, or is it an invention of a category of thought, which says «no, it cannot be»?

The phrase can be changed to «yes, yes it can» if we believe we have something to gain. Then we must ask ourselves if, despite everything, including the destruction of civilisation, it is possible to risk a fight to the death –o characteristic of human nature– as long as a community, alone or allied, fights to the end and some of the members can somehow survive in a dead world. Therefore, the answer to the first question as to whether a third world war is likely is, naturally, yes. The international system has completely changed in a few short years and the possibility of its complete destruction has increased several hundredfold in this time. Not just because there are now three great nuclear powers (the U.S., Russia and China), each with their own strategic interests, but because war, which is the essence of human communities organised on the basis of strategies to further their own ends, is part of the make-up of these communities. Death by violence has always been a defining characteristic of human nature and, as technology has developed, we have seen violence escalate to the point of no return: all-out nuclear war. Nowadays, we speak lightly of ever-growing apocalyptic threats and are unaware of the significance of the destruction of the entire system of states. Therefore, the final question is: Can anyone win a third world war? Does anyone have anything to gain from it?

Withdrawal from the INF Treaty and the silent witnesses: NATO and the European Union

On 20 October 2018, President Trump announced the U.S.'s intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty because, unlike the START Treaty, the former has no expiration

date. In the reasons given for the decision, it was stated that Russia «has been violating the treaty for years» and that it has been developing various missile systems banned under the INF Treaty since 2008. Criticisms were primarily directed at the development of the 9M729 (SSC-8) cruise missile which can be equipped with nuclear warheads. The announcement was in line with the new nuclear defence policy announced by President Trump on 3 February 2018. The rationale was that the world today is more unstable, new powers have emerged to challenge U.S. hegemony and, therefore, the U.S. must keep all its options open if it is to address these threats, including the development and deployment of all types of arms, including nuclear weapons, which give the U.S. a comparative advantage over potential rivals.

The Russian authorities immediately described the decision as a «very dangerous step» that would jeopardise international security. On the same day the announcement was made, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, said that Russia condemned what he called attempts by the U.S. to gain concessions «through a method of blackmail»¹³. And former Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, is quoted as saying: «Do they really not understand in Washington what this could lead to? Given this situation, the UN and the Security Council must be summoned, because Trump's decision affects the whole world»¹⁴. Press Secretary for the president of Russia, Dmitry Peskov, said on 21 October 2018 «after the last statements, explanations of the American side will be required»¹⁵. For his part, the Russian Ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Antonov, had already commented on 10 October 2018 that «Recently, we hear more and again statements from the US military command that the country requires intermediate- and short-range missiles to deter China [...] Could it be that the United States is looking for a pretext to abandon the INF Treaty, while, obviously, blaming Russia for it?»¹⁶.

The then U.S. National Security Adviser, John Bolton's visit to Moscow on 22 October 2018 to interview Sergei Lavrov and Russia's National Security Adviser, Nikolai Patrushev, did nothing to dispel the doubts surrounding the decision announced by President Trump. But, as we know, Trump does not change his mind once he has made a decision. Therefore, on 20 November 2018, President Putin stated that he was willing to negotiate to save the treaty, but warned that if the United States ultimately decided to pull out, Russia would take the necessary measures to ensure its security. And Moscow has the resources to do so: a whole panoply of new strategic weapons

¹³ Quoted from «Rusia califica de "chantaje" la ruptura del tratado nuclear por parte de Trump». *El Mundo*. 21 October 2018, at <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2018/10/21/5bcc6946468aebd9578b4645.html>.

¹⁴ Quoted from «Donald Trump desata la carrera nuclear». *El Mundo*. 22 October 2018, at <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2018/10/22/5bccca2822601d81538b4622.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Quoted from «Embajador ruso no descarta que EE. UU. busque abandonar el Tratado INF y acusar de ello a Rusia». *Sputnik*. 12 October 2018, at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/politica/201810121082691676-armas-nucleares-eeuu-rusia-corea-norte/>.

systems, as announced by President Putin in his address to the two chambers of the Russian parliament on 1 March 2018: Kinzhal hypersonic missiles, Avangard hypersonic weapons, Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missiles, Poseidon nuclear-powered torpedoes and Sarmat ICBMs. In other words, Russia had already laid some of the groundwork.

What stance did the European leaders in Brussels take on the exchange of accusations between the two great nuclear powers? As always, the senior European policy-makers expressed their obvious concern over the announcement of the collapse of the INF Treaty because it further complicated relations with Russia at a delicate moment in the Ukraine conflict and because it could lead to a new arms race of unpredictable proportions. Although Andrea Thompson, the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations the exact opposite at a meeting on 15 May 2019¹⁷.

NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg said that «The INF Treaty has been for 30 years the cornerstone of arms control. The treaty not only reduced the number of missiles but actually banned a whole category». [...] This has served us all well — I think especially in Germany where we really saw the dangers related to these weapons in the «70s and 80s», before going on to add «This treaty has been extremely important»¹⁸. However, he stressed that Russia «has developed and is deploying new missiles» that are «mobile, hard to detect, nuclear capable» and can reach European cities «with little warning time», before going on to add «if we allow Russia to [continue to breach the agreement] without any consequences, it will undermine the respect for not only the INF Treaty but for all other arms control treaties». And to avoid this, Stoltenberg said «We will make a measured, proportionate and defensive decision», though he failed to specify what the measures were, except that «We have asked all our military authorities, our commanders to look into different options and consequences».

What is happening at a political level on the Western side? Basically, U.S. political leaders are using NATO to lend «moral» force to the implementation of U.S. policy, citing the famous «TransAtlantic Community of Values». If they were to adopt a unilateral stance on certain matters, their arguments would not be readily accepted, but if they say they are NATO's, they win support because they are based on the value of allied solidarity. In the end, what the U.S. says, goes; the U.S. is determined to enforce its interests at all costs and, ultimately, it gets its way. This was evident, for instance, with the issue of the deployment of anti-missile defence systems in Europe: in bilateral negotiations, governments rejected the initiative, but as a group they approved it and the system was subsequently deployed in Romania and is expected to be deployed in Poland soon.

The European Union's stance is attached less political importance. The High Representative of the EU, Federica Mogherini, spoke of «universality» in an open letter

¹⁷ Full text available at https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/051519_Thompson_Testimony.pdf.

¹⁸ Quoted from «Stoltenberg pide cuentas a Rusia sobre el cumplimiento del Tratado INF». *Op. cit.*

dated 31 January 2019: «[...] the stakes for our own security are simply too high. The starting point cannot be to dismantle the current architecture and start from scratch. We Europeans are working at all levels to promote the universalisation and implementation of existing agreements». «Preventing a new arms race is in our collective interest. That is why we have asked the United States to consider the consequences its possible withdrawal from the INF will have on its own security, and on our collective security. And, we expect the Russian Federation to address serious concerns regarding its compliance with the INF»¹⁹.

Therefore, NATO and the EU stand as silent witnesses to the strategic decisions of the U.S. And this ties in with our theory on the lack of European leadership at this critical time. It makes us wonder how Javier Solana would have acted in this situation, which, as we shall see, is really a covert pact between the two great nuclear powers to discontinue the nuclear disarmament treaties to further their own security interests.

Hidden truths: the national interests underlying withdrawal from the INF Treaty

On 1 February 2019, the White House announced that the United States was suspending its obligations under the INF Treaty and beginning the process of withdrawing from the Treaty. Thus, the announcement triggered the six-month notice period required for permanent withdrawal from the Treaty «unless Russia comes back into compliance by destroying all of its violating missiles, launchers, and associated equipment» – a direct reference to the famous Iskander-M missile system we spoke of earlier²⁰. The announcement merely served to implement a political decision taken earlier by the Trump Administration acting in its own security interests.

Moscow wasted no time in responding. The Russian authorities immediately issued a public announcement stating that they were also suspending their obligations under the INF Treaty and accused the U.S. of repeated violations of the agreement, the most blatant being the deployment of the Aegis-based Mk-41 vertical launch system in Deveselu, which could be equipped to launch the Tomahawk cruise missile – perhaps taking advantage of the technical stop scheduled for the base in Romania that summer?

However, do the security interests now being invoked correspond to a national interest in maintaining global strategic stability? According to President Putin, Washington is «constantly looking for certain pretexts to dismantle the global security sys-

19 «La labor para crear una “Europa de la defensa”». *El Economista.es*. 31 January 2019, at <https://www.eleconomista.es/opinion-blogs/noticias/9669713/01/19/La-labor-para-crear-una-Europa-de-la-defensa.html>.

20 The full announcement is available at the official Twitter account of the national security adviser, John Bolton, at <https://twitter.com/AmbJohnBolton/status/1091363490907017216>.

tem»,²¹ jeopardising international security, as occurred with the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty) of 1972, from which the U.S. announced its withdrawal on 13 December 2001²². This is why he instructed the Russian government not to initiate new talks with the U.S. at least until «the American partners were mature enough for equal and meaningful dialogue» based on bilateralism and parity, the principles upon which disarmament treaties are founded.

Later on, in his address to the two chambers of the Russian parliament on 20 February 2019, President Putin reaffirmed that the withdrawal of the U.S. from the INF Treaty would have very serious consequences for strategic stability. He stated that the U.S. was the first to violate the treaty by «deploying launchers in Romania and Poland that are fit for launching Tomahawk cruise missiles»²³. In doing so, the United States was trying to achieve hegemony with its anti-missile shield. President Putin stressed the fact that «Russia does not intend to deploy such missiles in Europe first», but if the U.S. were to do so, Moscow would be «forced to respond with mirror or asymmetric actions». Cruise missiles, equipped with nuclear or conventional warheads, «can reach Moscow in just 10–12 minutes», which represents «a very serious threat» and would considerably exacerbate the current international situation. Consequently, «Russia will be forced to create and deploy weapons that can be used not only in the areas we are directly threatened from, but also in areas that contain decision-making centres for the missile systems threatening us».

According to the Russian president, all these measures are essentially intended as a deterrent, given that «We are not interested in confrontation and we do not want it, especially with a global power like the United States of America», which, of course, is entitled «to think what they want. But can they count? Probably they can. So let them calculate the range and speed of our future arms systems. This is all we are asking: just do the maths first and take decisions that create additional serious threats to our country afterwards»²⁴. Thus, President Putin upholds the doctrine of the mass use of nuclear weapons should his country become the target of a large-scale attack.

The statements demonstrate that in an increasingly multipolar world, the two great powers are progressively abandoning the treaties intended to put an end to bipolar confrontation. However, at the same time, they are returning to the language of the Cold War, which they paradoxically accuse each other of engaging in.

²¹ Quoted from «Putin responde a EE. UU. y Rusia suspende su participación en el tratado de desarme INF». *El Mundo*. 2 February 2019, at <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2019/02/02/5c556ce3fdddf780b8b4603.html>.

²² The text of the ABM Treaty, signed in Moscow on 26 May 1972, is available at the official website of the U.S. Department of State: <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/101888.htm>.

²³ The full text of the speech is available at https://spain.mid.ru/es_ES/-/discurso-anual-del-presidente-de-rusia-vladimir-putin-ante-la-asamblea-federal?redirect=https://spain.mid.ru/.

²⁴ Ibid.

The question this leads to is: Who is the actual enemy? Who do we have to prepare for and arm ourselves against with every conceivable system and weapon, as set out in the national security documents of the Trump Administration? Russia forms part of the strategic stability system and participates in the non-proliferation regime that serves as a basis for maintaining the quasi-monopoly of the two great nuclear powers. Its foreign policy and military modernisation programme seek to restore Russia to its position as a great power but they do not threaten U.S. global hegemony.

China aspires to become a global power. It is already an economic power, and its political leaders are pursuing a foreign policy that will allow China to exert long-term global influence. Despite the ambitious military modernisation programme it was able to undertake on account of the economic growth of the past two decades, China's nuclear arsenal merely serves a defensive purpose based on a policy of minimum nuclear deterrence. However, Washington claims that China is developing new missile systems, including hypersonic weapons, which pose a direct threat to U.S. security, the naval forces deployed in the Asia Pacific region and its allies. Former U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Harry Harris said in congressional testimony in 2017 that China has «the largest and most diverse missile force in the world, with an inventory of more than 2,000 ballistic and cruise missiles»²⁵. However, upon closer examination, it can be concluded that China's nuclear programme does not pose a direct or imminent threat to the U.S. or Russia, both of which would be in a position to initiate a nuclear strike of truly catastrophic proportions; indeed, in this regard, there were attempts at concerted action between the two during the Cold War. The U.S. has also pointed out that China is not a party to the INF Treaty, or any arms control treaty for that matter. However, this is merely a reflection of a pre-existing reality: in 1987 China was irrelevant in terms of global disarmament. Indeed, while on a visit to Moscow as recently as 13 May 2019, the Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, stated that his country has no interest in being part of any nuclear arms control treaty, and again pointed out that China pursues a nuclear strategy of self-defence, whereby it has sufficient and effective arsenal that it will only use should it become the target of a nuclear attack. Therefore, China claims to pursue an extremely cautious nuclear policy that does not pose a threat. How other countries perceive it is another story.

And what about North Korea and Iran? It would be rather simplistic to cite the threats posed by these two minor actors as justification for terminating the INF Treaty, a bilateral agreement between two great nuclear powers, whose legacy lies in, let us not forget, post-Cold War strategic stability.

Therefore, the only thing left on the table is the U.S. strategists' expectation that they will be able to freely develop, without political or regulatory constraints, advanced missile systems based on lightning-speed technology, and low-yield nuclear warheads

²⁵ Quoted from Brookes, P. «The INF Treaty-What it means for the U.S., Russia and China today». *The Heritage Foundation* no. 1301. 15 January 2019, at <https://www.heritage.org/node/10612903/print-display>

intended for tactical use, which is the dream of limited nuclear war theoreticians. Indeed, the Undersecretary for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, Andrea Thompson, admitted as much in a candid statement made on 6 February 2019: «Now the Department of Defense will be able to conduct those research and development activities that they hadn't because we'd been complying (with the INF Treaty)»²⁶. As stated earlier, the point is that the current strategic scenario is complex and unstable, and made up of several major powers that challenge the U.S.'s power. Consequently, the U.S. has to have the necessary capability to deal with present and future threats, and this includes any weaponry that can give it a comparative advantage over similarly equipped rivals.

The outcome may be even more complex, however. In the wake of Washington's announcement, Russia immediately reciprocated by announcing that its «response will be symmetrical»²⁷, i.e. it would acquire as many supersonic and hypersonic missiles, including land-based missiles, loaded with either nuclear or conventional warheads, as it was allowed to have without violating international treaties. As Ambassador Antonov pointed out on 15 April 2019, Russia's new strategic weapons are not covered by the New START Treaty but –and this is the interesting part of his statement– Russia was not refusing to discuss its new strike systems with the United States as part of a bilateral dialogue on strategic stability²⁸. Less than a month later, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, stated that «I think that as a priority, we and our colleagues from the United States should focus on the extension of the New START signed in 2010»²⁹, and the matter was discussed by President Putin and the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, at a meeting in Sochi on 14 May 2019.

Final considerations

In light of the new strategic situation brought about by the permanent abandonment of post-Cold War nuclear disarmament treaties, what is the outlook for international security in the near future? We believe that, in reality, the two great nuclear powers, which together account for 92 % of the world's nuclear weapons, no longer

26 Quoted from «EE. UU. se comprometerá con Rusia en el control de armas cuando sea apropiado». *Sputnik*. 6 February 2019, at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/defensa/201902061085286765-como-eeuu-y-rusia-controlan-desarrollo-de-armas/>.

27 Quoted from «Rusia suspende su participación en el Tratado INF como respuesta a la retirada de EEUU». *RT*. 2 February 2019, at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/304327-putin-rusia-suspender-participacion-tratado>.

28 Statements quoted from «Russia's new strategic weapons don't fall under limits of New START Treaty, says envoy». *TASS*. 15 April 2019, at <http://tass.com/defense/1053781>.

29 Quoted from «Rusia prioriza la prórroga del START III sobre un pacto nuclear con EE. UU. y China». *Sputnik*. 5 May 2019, at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/politica/201905051087083804-prorroga-de-tratado-start-eeuu-rusia/>.

accept the INF Treaty. In other words, they both reject the restrictions on the development of short- and medium-range missiles, which they regard as absolutely essential for dealing with new and uncertain threats. However, this leads to the definitive breakdown of the system of strategic stability as it renders ineffective the treaties that paved the way for the end of the Cold War, German reunification and the return to democracy of the communist bloc countries behind the Iron Curtain.

It also throws the deterrence equation off balance because, as we have seen, how can we tell if an airborne missile is a nuclear strike or not?

And, finally, it fuels a new strategic arms race which could have devastating consequences for international security, although the two powers publicly deny this to naïve citizens.

The first scenario we consider seems the most obvious because of its simplicity. The idea is to let each power do as they please with no further constraint than their own national security interests. However, we know that it is in the interests of the major powers to maintain the current system –let us not forget that the first constitutional principle of the system is self-preservation– and that, in today’s international society, these are global security interests. We are therefore looking at an implicit system. However, the absence of regulatory restrictions, i.e. of an explicit system, clears the way for a new arms race where special emphasis is placed on the militarisation of space and advanced weapons. This new power struggle involves both the great powers, which maintain the status quo, and emerging powers, which find themselves compelled to participate lest they be excluded from the struggle for global influence; this can be construed as access to the most advanced technologies, and also explains the hostility surrounding the alleged trade talks taking place between Washington and Beijing, which are really a masked struggle for power.

Secondly, and as U.S. government officials have recently suggested, there is the option to negotiate and sign a new global disarmament treaty covering all nuclear weapons, both strategic and non-strategic, which would include the renewal of the New START treaty set to expire in 2021. Moscow has not explicitly ruled out this prospect and it appears to be the solution senior diplomats are working on. However, the talks should be monitored closely.

Finally, we can envisage a third –albeit highly hypothetical– scenario, where the European powers lay the groundwork for real progress towards the establishment of an intra-European nuclear control system, which would be one of the cornerstones of a new regional security system within the global strategic stability system. If the great world powers fail to reach consensus on maintaining the strategic stability system, it will be necessary to create a European nuclear deterrence force, drawing on France’s own power, put at the service of collective defence and with new institutional mechanisms that would have to be created from scratch. The legal basis for this can be found in the mutual defence clause of Article 42.7 of the Treaty of the European Union. The UK’s withdrawal from the European Union facilitates political speculation about this objective.

To achieve this, the European leaders must have a clear awareness of the interests currently at stake in the battle for global influence, and be willing to play the game as an independent player. It should be borne in mind, however, that this option should be exercised within the Western Bloc, which is the most advanced community of values that exists today and, indeed, the only one with a holistic vision of human society. However, this scenario calls for European leadership and, given the obvious lack thereof, should probably be ruled out from the start.

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