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Washington is preparing for nuclear war in Europe

By Johannes Stern

2 September 2017

Amid mounting military and diplomatic tensions between the US and Russia, the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported Friday that the American Congress has taken the first steps toward Washington's annulling of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

The INF, or Washington Treaty on Mid-range Nuclear Systems, is a bilateral agreement reached between the United States and the Soviet Union on the decommissioning of short- and mid-range missiles (with a range of between 500 and 5,500 miles), and the banning of their production.

The treaty, signed on 8 December 1987 by US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, led to a significant reduction of US nuclear weapons in Europe. The nuclear-armed mid-range Pershing II missiles, whose stationing in Western Europe five years earlier had triggered the largest peace demonstrations to that point in history, were withdrawn.

The danger now is "that the US will construct new missiles and station them in Europe," warned the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. A major shift would be set "into motion" and Europe would stand "on the brink of a new nuclear era ... nuclear mid-range missiles were the horror of the Cold War ... thirty years on, the spectre has returned."

The reason for the potential ending of the treaty, according to the newspaper, is the “deep freeze” in US-Russia relations and announcements by both sides of intentions to “comprehensively modernise their nuclear arsenals.”

Characteristically, the explosive reports by the German press have been totally ignored by the US print and broadcast media.

The report came amid a hysterical campaign being mounted by the US and NATO over military exercises planned by the Russian military in western Russia, Belarus and Russia’s exclave of Kaliningrad later this month, with Washington and its allies suggesting that they could be used as a “Trojan horse” to pre-position weapons stockpiles and prepare an invasion of the Baltic states.

The Pentagon has deployed seven US F-15C fighter planes to a base in Lithuania along with an additional 600 US airborne troops to the Baltics in advance of the war games.

This military build-up has been carried out in conjunction with a major US diplomatic provocation as the Trump administration has retaliated against Russia’s expulsion of US embassy personnel from Russia (itself a tit-for-tat response to earlier expulsions of Russians from the US) by ordering the shutdown of three Russian diplomatic facilities in Washington, New York and San Francisco. Moscow has charged that the action, which it said was accompanied by FBI searches of the San Francisco consulate and the residences of Russian diplomatic personnel, constituted a violation of international law.

The increasingly dangerous friction between the world’s two largest nuclear powers is unfolding in the context of growing war dangers internationally, particularly on the Korean peninsula. Russian President Vladimir Putin warned on Friday that the increasingly bellicose confrontation between the US and North Korea had left the region “balanced on the verge of a large-scale conflict.”

It is in this context that the reported threats of an escalation of nuclear brinksmanship on the continent of Europe pose such an imminent danger.

A NATO document classified as secret which was obtained by a joint research group made up of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and public regional broadcasters NDR and WDR contains 39 proposals on how NATO can take action against Russia. According to diplomats, “formal consultations within NATO” could take place in the autumn at the initiative of the US. The paper was “a compendium of all options available” carefully “divided up into the categories ‘conceivable’, ‘currently to be avoided’ and ‘not advisable’.”

Even the more than a dozen “conceivable” options, which NATO believes would be compatible with the INF agreement, “would exacerbate already tense relations,” according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Proposals include “increased rotation of B-2 and B-52 bombers from the US to Europe,” an “expansion of early warning systems and missile or submarine defence,” and the strengthening of “military and civilian infrastructure against attacks.” The increased readiness and capability for a nuclear retaliatory strike, “nuclear signalling,” is seen as “conceivable.”

Two proposals are especially provocative: “to expand the so-called nuclear targeting planning – i.e. identifying and confirming the targets for nuclear weapons,” and “to increase the operational readiness of those air bases that would drop these bombs in case of war.” On this, “NATO also advises caution,” the *Süddeutsche* noted. The confirmation of targets, i.e., the concrete planning of a nuclear assault, could rapidly provoke a nuclear war with Russia, which could potentially wipe out humanity.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, if the US abandons the INF treaty, “measures currently found in the ‘not advisable’ category [would be] conceivable: Construction, testing and stationing of a new class of missiles – a further step into a new Cold War.”

The German ruling class is extremely concerned by Washington’s increasingly aggressive war drive against Russia. Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democrats, SPD) warned in an interview on Thursday against “repeating the worst mistakes of the Cold War. We are on our way to a Cold War 2.0. All of the good treaties on disarmament and arms controls from Gorbachev and Reagan are in acute peril. Europe is threatened once again with becoming a military training ground for nuclear weapons.”

He continued: “It is wrong for Mrs. Merkel to remain silent on this. Germany of all countries must raise its voice against this. We have to stick to being a power for peace and oppose an arms spiral. In that context, I found the statement by [SPD Chancellor candidate] Martin Schulz that we must focus on finally ridding our country of nuclear weapons to be correct.”

Schulz and Gabriel are in the midst of an election campaign, and are well aware that the vast majority of Germany’s population—like that of the rest of the planet—opposes military rearmament and war, and would welcome the withdrawal of the US nuclear weapons still stationed in Germany.

The two Social Democratic politicians are by no means committed to peace, but are rather leading representatives of German imperialism. They oppose the US plans for nuclear rearmament because a return to the conditions of the Cold War would endanger Germany’s own plans for global power and increase Berlin’s dependence on the US. It would undermine Germany’s economic and geopolitical interests, which are ever more at odds with those of Washington.

In July, Gabriel strongly criticised the latest US sanctions against Russia. Although Europe and the US had “jointly and in close consultation answered Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and Russia’s actions in eastern Ukraine,” it was not possible to accept “the threat of unlawful extraterritorial sanctions against European companies participating in the expansion of European energy supplies!” The supply of energy to Europe was “a European affair and not one for the United States of America!”

Following the latest threats from the US, the Social Democrats are leading the way in attempting to transform the widespread opposition to Donald Trump’s right-wing, militarist policies into support for German militarism. Asked whether he thought “the fear of many Germans that Trump could overreact and incite a war is justified,” Gabriel answered, “I am concerned that the

US will be forever lost to the West. Some of the people around Donald Trump want to replace the rule of law with the law of the strongest. We must assert ourselves against this.”

Papers published by think tanks and the major political parties give a sense of the methods German imperialism intends to use to “assert” its interests. In “Principles for a Social Democratic Security and Defence Policy,” the SPD writes, “To be equal to the increased demands for international deployments to tackle crises, cyber defence, and the defence of our own population, we need a modern armed forces capable of action. We need an army in which [...] troops capable of deploying are ready for crisis situations. For this we have to better equip the army with personnel and material.”

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) is the only party participating in Germany’s federal election campaign that opposes the US build-up of nuclear weapons from the standpoint of the international working class, and fights for a socialist strategy to combat social inequality, militarism and war. To the capitalist warmongers on both sides of the Atlantic, we counterpose the unity of the international working class. Under conditions of the mounting danger of nuclear war, this perspective assumes enormous urgency.