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afgazad@gmail.com

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By Andre Damon
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US tests INF-banned missile after Democrats rubber-stamp Trump's nuclear build-up

The US Air Force has for the first time tested a ballistic missile that violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in a threat to Russia and China. The Trump administration withdrew from the INF treaty in August as part of its efforts to vastly expand the US arsenal of nuclear weapons and loosen restrictions on their use.

The test comes just days after House Democrats voted for a massive military spending bill that stripped out language limiting the Trump administration's ability to develop and deploy new nuclear weapons.



Screenshot of a video by the Department of Defense showing a ballistic missile being launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base, California on December 12, 2019

The approval of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) was part of a blitz of new legislation ahead of the expected House impeachment vote, including the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), a trade war measure targeting China.

While the impeachment centers on allegations that Trump was insufficiently aggressive in fighting Washington's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the Democrats have made clear that, when it comes to expanding Trump's power to wage war, there are no limits and no expense will be spared.

Notably, the latest version of the bill removes language that limited the deployment of the "low-yield" nuclear weapons being developed under Trump, which a group of former policymakers last year called "a gateway to nuclear catastrophe."

It also stripped out language that would have prevented the Pentagon from testing a new long-range Precision Strike Missile capable of flying beyond the INF range cutoff.

The NDAA "supports" the plan by the military to produce 80 new plutonium pits—the heart of nuclear weapons—per year, proclaiming that "nuclear forces" are the "cornerstone of our national defense."

It also supports the development of "conventional prompt strike" weapons, which are nothing more than non-nuclear long-range ballistic missiles—effectively indistinguishable from the intercontinental ballistic missiles whose launch would betoken a nuclear Armageddon.

But, not to fear, the NDAA "directs the Secretary of the Navy to ensure that technologies developed for the conventional prompt strike program are transferrable to surface-ship platforms" in order to "address ambiguity and miscalculation concerns."

After withdrawing from the INF treaty in August, the Trump White House is moving rapidly ahead with a \$1 trillion plan to expand, "modernize" and miniaturize the US nuclear arsenal, effectively putting US nuclear forces on a hair trigger.

These moves are part of US preparations for what Defense Secretary Mark Esper called "high-intensity conflicts against competitors such as Russia and China."

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, signed over 30 years ago by US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, banned a whole class of weapons that had vastly increased the risk of a nuclear conflict.

Both countries agreed to end all use and production of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,417 miles).

This week's test is only the latest in the rush by the United States to develop weapons that violate the INF treaty. Earlier this year, the US fired a modified, ground-launched Tomahawk cruise missile beyond the limits of the INF treaty. While cruise missiles skim the surface of the earth, flying like an airplane, ballistic missiles are fired upward toward space then fall to their target. The vast majority of the world's nuclear arsenal consists of ballistic missiles.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said the test showed that the United States had long planned to violate the INF treaty, even as it sought to blame the treaty's breakdown on Moscow. "We've said more than once that the United States has been making preparations for violating the INF Treaty," he said. "This clearly confirms that the treaty was ruined at the initiative of the United States."

"The real aim is to free itself to develop advanced missiles and seek unilateral military advantage," added Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying. "The U.S. has been highlighting the so-called Russian violations and Chinese missile threat. These tricks are nothing but clumsy distractions."

Esper said that the US stands ready to rapidly deploy such missiles. "Once we develop intermediate range missiles... then we will work closely and consult closely with our allies in Europe, Asia and elsewhere with regard to any possible deployments," he told CNN.

"The National Defense Strategy provides very clear direction to restore our competitive edge in the reemergence of great power competition," said Col. Anthony Mastalir, commander of the 30th Air Wing of the Air Force Space Command, which carried out this week's test. "We owe it to our nation to rapidly evolve and develop our capacity to defend," he said.

Mastalir was referring to the 2018 US strategy document that declared that "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security," clearly targeting Russia and China.

In addition to shredding restrictions on the development of nuclear weapons, the latest draft of the National Defense Authorization Act takes another step toward a US conflict with Russia, with the allocation of \$300 million in new aid to Ukraine.

Among the new assistance is "an additional \$50 million in military aid on top of the \$250 million congress had approved in last year's NDAA," reported Defense One.

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