



OPINION: Vladimir Putin's missile threat is serious, but nothing we couldn't handle: Today's talker

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has issued a clear warning to the United States: If Washington deploys new intermediate-range missiles in Europe, Moscow will, too.

The context behind this threat is President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Negotiated in 1987 by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the INF was a fairly successful arms-control agreement in which each party agreed to eliminate a whole class of missiles.

In recent years, both sides accused each other of failing to fully uphold the agreement. Instead of pursuing diplomacy to resolve the dispute, Trump ordered a unilateral withdrawal, accompanied by a promise to start deploying the prohibited weapons.

Putin's threat might seem like cause for alarm, but Americans should keep two things in mind.

First, hard-line policies against Russia increase the likelihood that Russia will respond in kind. From Moscow's perspective, this is a reaction to an onslaught of provocations from Washington. For all the allegations of Trump's weakness on Russia, the administration's official strategy documents single out Russia as a principal threat to U.S. security.

In addition to withdrawing from the INF, Washington has imposed harsh economic sanctions on Moscow as punishment for meddling in Ukraine. Other U.S. policies contribute to Russian feelings of insecurity. Trump has increased troop deployments in Europe and is considering opening a new military base in Poland.

Second, Putin's threat is just not all that threatening. For starters, the threat was conditional: He vowed that Russia will not be the first to deploy new intermediate-range missiles, but it will do so if the United States does first. He also expressed a willingness to return to the negotiating table, insisting that "we don't want confrontation."

More to the point, Russian military power hardly presents a direct threat to America. Its gross domestic product is about \$1.6 trillion, less than a 10th of ours, and its annual military spending is a mere \$66.3 billion, compared with the more than \$700 billion that we spend. Russia has nukes but possesses limited power-projection capabilities and few allies that can aid its out-of-area ambitions.

Russia certainly acts aggressively in its near abroad, but Europe can easily deter it. Europe vastly outspends Russia on defense, at almost \$285 billion per year.

Washington tends to inflate the threat from Moscow, while simultaneously ignoring U.S. policies that exacerbate tensions. A new arms race in Europe was a predictable consequence of Trump's withdrawal from the INF. Luckily, there's still time for peaceful diplomacy to mitigate these risks. Whether the political will exists is another question entirely.

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