US's Withdrawal from Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

What is the issue?

- The U.S. has decided to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with Russia.
- The U.S.'s unilateral withdrawal from a nuclear treaty threatens to trigger a new arms race.

How did the INF treaty come about?

- The INF treaty has its origins in the Euromissile crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s.
- The Soviet Union deployed the SS-20, an advanced and accurate missile that could strike most of Europe.
- America had short-range missiles in Europe, which could not reach Soviet territory, and long-range ones at home and aboard submarines, but nothing in this middle category.
- In the late 1980s, the intermediate-range missiles were seen as a trigger for nuclear war because of their short flight times, as little as 10 minutes.
- In this backdrop, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty was signed in 1987 by U.S.'s Ronald Reagan and Russia's Mikhail Gorbachev.
- The treaty barred both countries from deploying land-launched cruise missiles in the 500- to 5,500-km range.
- It did not, however, cover air- or sea-launched weapons, although those missiles fly similar distances.

What is US's rationale in scrapping it?

- Russia appears to have been violating the treaty in letter and spirit.
- In 2008, the U.S. expressed concern over the Russian Novator 9M729 missile tests.
- Again during the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, the U.S. alleged that Moscow was testing a ground-based cruise missile.
- Despite this, the U.S.'s current move cannot be regarded as purely retaliatory.
- Both Mr. Trump and his National Security Adviser were expressing a sense

of disregard for arms control agreements.

- Trump had for long maintained that he would refuse to abide by a treaty that other parties were disregarding.
- Besides this, China's growing arsenal poses a threat for strategists in the U.S.
- China is, reportedly, expanding its cruise-missile arsenal, potentially neutralising the capability of American warships that could seek to approach the Chinese coastline during a standoff.
- Trump now strategizes that he could develop ground-launched missiles and keep Russia's aggression in check through a military-posture superiority.
- He could also save the exchequer some cash as this option is cheaper than cruise missiles.

What are the concerns?

- The move signals a changing balance of power in global nuclear politics taken forward by China’s rise as a regional power.
- Shifting geo-politics also requires that European concerns be factored into strategic discussions on the INF.
- This is particularly because it is Europe that is most immediately threatened by the Russian stockpile.
- But it appears that Mr. Trump may not have consulted with European allies before announcing the suspension of the treaty.

What could the implications be?

- Russia might now build up intermediate-range missiles aimed at Europe.
- In turn, America would speed up its pursuit of a matching capability.
- With a potential missile race, there is a concern that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) might also be scrapped.
- START is a US-Russian arms-control deal that covers mostly longer-range weapons - intercontinental ballistic missiles, due to be renewed in 2021.
- Given all these, in effect, the U.S. seems to be loosing the scope of coming to an agreement with Russia on an issue of global concern.

Source: The Hindu, The NewYork Times

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