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A Vital Nuclear Agreement, at Risk

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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There's much more to the deeply troubled Russian-American relationship than Ukraine. Under the radar, tensions have also been brewing over compliance with a number of arms control treaties that for decades have been vital to keeping the peace between the two nuclear powers and setting an example for other countries.

Washington accuses Moscow of violating at least five of these agreements. A failure to resolve the impasse could have extremely dangerous consequences for the post-Cold War order, since even 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the two sides together possess more than 10,000 nuclear weapons, more than 90 percent of what exists in the world.

The most serious dispute centers on the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which bans both sides from deploying ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of between 300 and 3,400 miles that carry nuclear or conventional warheads. These were among the weapons America once stationed in Europe to demonstrate a commitment to its allies and deter the Soviets from aggression.

Under the treaty, signed by President Ronald Reagan and the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, America destroyed 846 missiles and the Soviets, 1,846 missiles. Both sides had come to see the systems as unacceptably risky to their own forces since they would only have 10 to 15 minutes warning of an attack compared to twice that in attacks involving long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles. Mr. Gorbachev also was desperate to cut military spending.

Although the pact also prohibited the production and flight testing of new I.N.F. systems, Russia, flush with oil money and pushing a more aggressive foreign policy, began testing a new cruise missile as early as 2008. The Obama administration raised the matter with the Russians in May 2013, and in July 2014 it formally alleged that the test violated the treaty. The Russians have refused to even acknowledge conducting a missile test or to discuss potential solutions. Instead, they have accused the United States of noncompliance, which the administration denies.

A resolution is complicated by continued hostility over President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and concerns that Mr. Putin, determined to reconstitute the Soviet Union, may be eager to face down the West. For some time, Russia has seen NATO's presence on its borders as a threat. Meanwhile, the Americans say Russia has failed to comply fully with at

least four other treaties, including those requiring the destruction of biological and chemical arms.

There are other factors at work, too. Russia resents the fact that China, India and Pakistan are building their missile arsenals without treaty constraints and has attached greater importance to its nuclear forces as its conventional forces have deteriorated.

Despite the dispute, it would be a huge mistake for the United States to withdraw from the I.N.F. treaty, as some congressmen have demanded. That would remove all restraints on Russia and seriously weaken a system of treaties that has been remarkably effective over decades at curbing the spread of destructive weapons.

It would also be a mistake for either side to reintroduce the banned weapons onto their own territory or elsewhere. Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, recently asserted Moscow's right to put nuclear missiles in Crimea, while Brian McKeon, a senior Pentagon official, told Congress this month that one response to Russia's treaty violation could be to deploy American ground missiles in Europe. New deployments would reverse a trend in which the two countries have substantially reduced their huge arsenals in recent years.

The Obama administration should continue pursuing a diplomatic solution to the treaty dispute and resist the growing pressure in Congress for quick retaliation, which could make the situation worse. And it should explore other forms of pressure, like economic punishment and deployment of new defenses against cruise missiles.

So far, there is no evidence that Russia has deployed its new missiles, which would be a serious escalation. The United States and its allies should make efforts to bring Russia back into compliance with the treaty, and Russia needs to know that defiance will come at a cost.