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**INFLUENCE OF THE INTERMEDIATE-RANGE NUCLEAR
FORCES TREATY TERMINATION ON THE REGIONAL
SECURITY OF CENTRAL ASIA**

Abstract:

In recent years, we have seen an aggravation of relations between the leading nuclear powers. These relations have entered a phase of irreconcilable contradictions and political problems. This paper is devoted to the problem of preserving the nuclear-free status of Central Asian countries. The study of this issue is very relevant in the context of the intensified global geopolitical struggle between Russia, China, the United States, and Iran. The authors used the method of expert survey and scenario approach to study the stated issues. Based on the data obtained, scenarios for the development of the geopolitical situation in the region under consideration were developed.

Keywords:

regional security, Central Asia, INF Treaty, the Nuclear-free status of Central Asia, China, Russia, USA, Afghanistan, nuclear security, nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ).

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st Century, the issues of ensuring nuclear security are coming to the fore. This is mostly because the main geopolitical players do not maintain the previously existing nuclear security structure. This is evidenced by the increase in the number of countries possessing nuclear weapons, as well as the aggravation of relations between the main nuclear powers, represented by Russia, the United States, and China. The treaty in question expired at the initiative of the United States of America in 2019. In our opinion, the termination of this treaty on the one hand ‘unties the hands’ of the parties who signed it, and on the other hand leads to a situation of ‘dangerous freedom of action’, since the most effective instrument that has been curtailing the arms race for the past 30 years is disappearing. Now, without regard for others, you can create missiles, placing them at a very close distance from the border with a potential enemy.

The issue of nuclear security occupies a special place in the modern political science discourse. This is largely dictated by the fact that global stability depends on the responses to the challenges taking place due to the increase in the number of nuclear powers. Among the works devoted to the comprehensive study of nuclear deterrence, it is worth highlighting A. V. Fenenko³, I. F. Bocharov⁴, A. A. Kokoshin⁵, V. M. Burenok and Yu. Pechatnov⁶, N. Zinevich⁷, and others.

Various researchers are interested in the issue of ensuring global nuclear security, as it is in the concluded agreements that they see an instrument for ensuring global nuclear security. V. P. Kozin⁸, V.

³ A.V. Fenenko, *Sovremennyye kontseptsii yadernogo sderzhivaniya*, “Mezhdunarodnyye protsessy” Vol. 10, 2012, pp. 68-87, <<http://intertrends.ru/system/Doc/ArticlePdf/690/Fenenko-29.pdf>> (1.12.2020).

⁴ I. F. Bocharov, *Sovremennyye podkhody SSHA k yadernomu sderzhivaniyu*, “SSHA i Kanada: ekonomika, politika, kul'tura” 2008, no. 4, pp. 19-31.

⁵ A. A. Kokoshin, *Strategicheskoye yadernoye i neyadernoye sderzhivaniye: priority sovremennoy epokhi*, “Vestnik Rossiyskoy akademii nauk”, 2014, vol. 84, no. 3, pp. 185-195.

⁶ V. M. Burenok, Yu. A. Pechatnov, *O kriterial'nykh osnovakh yadernogo sderzhivaniya*, “Vooruzheniye i ekonomika”, 2013, no. 1, pp. 21-30.

⁷ N. Zinevic, *Yadernoye sderzhivaniye v nachale XXI veka*, “Obozrevatel”, 2007, p. 15.

⁸ V. P. Kozin, *K 30-letiyu podpisaniya dogovora o likvidatsii RSMD: klyuchevyye problemy realizatsii*, “SSHA i Kanada: ekonomika, politika i kul'tura”, 2018, no. 1 (577), pp. 25-42.

Dvorkin⁹, K. Bogdanov¹⁰, V. I. Esin¹¹, M. A. Zhuravkov¹², M. S. Soloviev¹³, Yu. G. Golub and S. Yu. Shenin¹⁴, A. E. Golyakova¹⁵, V. I. Batyuk¹⁶, Yu. I. Nadocheya¹⁷, E. P. Buzhinsky¹⁸, and others devoted their works to the study of the issues associated with the INF Treaty.

As a rule, in the works devoted to nuclear security, scientists put the main emphasis on the problem of ensuring the balance of power or the observance of the interests of the states possessing nuclear weapons. At the same time, it rarely comes to the question of ensuring the interests of nuclear powers in the regions whose states have declared themselves free of nuclear weapons. The nuclear-free status preservation by the Central Asian region (including Afghanistan) is, in our opinion, the most important issue that requires greater consideration, since this is the only region that is locked between Iran seeking to possess nuclear weapons, as well as the nuclear powers such as Pakistan, China, and Russia. It should be noted that the United States has the largest number of military bases on the entire planet. And if a

⁹ V. Z. Dvorkin, *Kak sokhranit' dogovor o likvidatsii raket sredney i men'shey dal'nosti*, "Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya" 2018, vol. 62, no. 10, pp. 22-25.

¹⁰ K. V. Bogdanov, *Po tu storonu dogovora RSMD: Voenno-politicheskiye posledstviya dlya Yevropy*, „Sovremennaya Yevropa”, 2019, no. 4 (89).

¹¹ V. I. Esin, *Otsenka vozmozhnostey sokhraneniya i adaptatsii dogovora RSMD k sovremennym realiyam. Rossiya i Amerika v XXI veke*, "Institut SSHA i Kanady Rossiyskoy akademii nauk", 2008, no. 1.

¹² M. A. Zhuravkov, *Dogovor mezhdru SSSR i SSHA o likvidatsii raket sredney i men'shey dal'nosti i yego posledstviya. Aktual'nyye problemy mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy i diplomatii (1918 g. – nachalo XXI veka)*, Moscow 2015, pp. 179-184.

¹³ M. S. Soloviev, *Razryv dogovora po likvidatsii raket sredney i maloy dal'nosti – kak faktor, podryvayushchiy mirovuyu bezopasnost*, „Sbornik trudov konferentsii. Materialy mezhdvuzovskogo nauchno-prakticheskogo seminara”, 2018, pp. 84-87.

¹⁴ Yu. G. Golub, S. Yu. Shenin, *Ostanovka ili tupik? Elity SSHA o krizise DRSMDF*, "Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnyye otnosheniya", 2020, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 20-28.

¹⁵ A. E. Golyakova, *K voprosu o vykhode SSHA iz DRSMDF: opasnyye posledstviya*, [in:] *Aktual'nyye problemy konstitutsionnogo, munitsipal'nogo i mezhdunarodnogo prava (sbornik nauchnykh statey)* Moscow 2019, pp. 37-41.

¹⁶ V. I. Batyuk, *Krakh dogovora o RSMD: chto dal'she?*, "Rossiya i Amerika v XXI veke", 2019, no. 1, p. 18.

¹⁷ Yu. I. Nadocheya, *Rossiysko-amerikanskiy dogovor RSMD i problema tret'ikh stran*, "SSHA i Kanada: ekonomika, politika, kul'tura", 2019, no. 3 (591), pp. 5-22.

¹⁸ E. P. Buzhinsky, *Yest' li budushcheye u dogovora o likvidatsii raket sredney i men'shey dal'nosti*, "Indeks bezopasnosti", 2014, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 147-152.

couple of years ago the Americans allegedly could afford to place an anti-missile defense system along the perimeter of the borders of China or Russia, today we are already talking about the fact that they will be able to deploy intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles in proximity to the borders of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. For Central Asia, the issue of maintaining a nuclear-free status is becoming topical, because the region borders on the countries, capable of producing this type of missiles and, hypothetically, can use them as an instrument of military pressure on neighbours.

Formulation of the problem. Given the change in the global balance of power, accompanied by the INF Treaty termination, the Central Asian states are faced with the problem of maintaining their nuclear-free status. Is the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty termination capable of affecting the security architecture of the region?

The purpose of the study is to determine the main threat of Central Asia losing its nuclear-free status after the termination of the treaty on the elimination of intermediate and shorter-range missiles (INF Treaty) concluded between the USSR and the United States on December 7, 1987.

Research objectives:

- 1) To identify the security risks of Central Asia after the INF Treaty termination;
- 2) To predict the most likely scenarios for the development of the situation in Central Asia after the termination of the INF Treaty based on the risks identified.

An expert survey and scenario-based forecasting were used as methods of research. We selected the expert survey method because the issues of the course of events in the Central Asian region are poorly studied and to determine the most likely scenarios for the unfolding situation, it is necessary to interview experts competent in this area. The experts are represented by specialists in the field of international relations and international security. This survey was conducted to collect the initial data for modeling the scenarios in Central Asia.

Scenario-based forecasting or so-called 'scenario planning' allows one to pay attention to the potential risks and to develop solutions that would manage them. It consists of determining alternative sequences of the developments in the region in a certain period of the future. In our study, the use of this method is a logical continuation of the expert survey conducted. The authors proposed the scenarios below.

Nuclear-free status of Central Asia

The declaration of the Central Asian region free of nuclear weapons was a very important and largely symbolic event. Marat Tazhin, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, noted in his article on the matter: “This historic document crowned the efforts of five Central Asian states which had been working for nine years to create a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ). On February 27, 1997, the leaders of the five Central Asian countries signed the Alma-Ata Declaration. In the light of their concerns over the state of the environment, which suffered as a result of the USSR nuclear complex operation, they fully approved the creation of the NWFZ in Central Asia¹⁹. The parties that signed the agreement ‘On a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Central Asia’ committed themselves not to allow the production, acquisition, deployment, storage or use of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices on their territory.”²⁰

The nuclear-free status of Central Asia is a guarantee that the United States of America will not be able to deploy its nuclear missiles in the region. Nevertheless, we should not forget about the presence of the U.S. military in Afghanistan, which have all the resources to deploy intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles on the territories controlled by the security forces of Afghanistan, which may target Iranian military facilities, Russia’s CSTO allies, and Russian military bases in the region, as well as military facilities in China. It is also important to note that Pakistan, neighboring Afghanistan, has been a full member of the SCO since the summer of 2017, and therefore can be a potential target for American missiles²¹. At least today, we are not talking about the fact that the U.S. presidential administration will take such a step. However, if the situation develops according to this scenario, all the most dangerous competitors for the United States hindering the implementation of

¹⁹ *Stat'ya Ministra inostrannykh del Respubliki Kazakhstan M. Tazhina otositel'no vstupleniya v silu Dogovora o zone, svobodnoy ot yadernogo oruzhiya, v Tsentral'noy Azii. Ofitsial'nyy sayt Posol'stva Respubliki Kazakhstan v Rossiyskoy Federatsii, <<http://old.kazembassy.ru/ru/posol/oficialnayaastana/vistupleniagosudlic/315-visgoslic48>> (12.20.2020).*

²⁰ *Dogovor o zone, svobodnoy ot yadernogo oruzhiya, v Tsentral'noy Azii Semipalatinsk, 8.09.2006.*

²¹ *Vstupleniye Indii i Pakistana v SHOS: chasha vesov na storone optimistov, <https://www.inform.kz/ru/vstuplenie-indii-i-pakistana-v-shos-chasha-vesov-na-storone-optimistov_a3034410> (20.20.2020).*

Washington's foreign policy in Eurasia will potentially be in the strike zone.

Besides, the Central Asian region is within the reach of missiles that can be deployed at U.S. military bases in Iraq, as well as on U.S. Navy ships in the Persian Gulf. The problems that the countries of the region will have to face are difficult to overestimate. All countries in the region are interested in ensuring the political situation around the new arms race does not go beyond the framework of international law. In the event of an increase in tension, the countries of the region are most likely to find themselves on the opposite side in the conflict with the United States of America. Maintaining neutrality as Turkmenistan is trying to do or multi-vector policy as pursued by most countries in the region will be virtually impossible under this scenario. Since the countries of the region are committed to Russia within the CSTO and to China within the SCO. Specifying the interests of the countries in the region, the following should be noted:

- 1) The countries of Central Asia are interested in maintaining the balance of power on the continent. They are not interested in weakening Iran and Russia in the Middle East, nor are they interested in weakening China. Moscow plays a decisive role in ensuring regional security in Central Asia. China is a key trading partner of the region's countries. The weakening of Iran will most likely directly affect the growth of terrorism which will inevitably threaten Afghanistan's neighbours in the region;
- 2) The countries of Central Asia are interested in preventing any conflict situations. The power imbalance in the region will inevitably lead to an increase in regional tensions. This is understood in the same way in all Central Asian capitals. Therefore, the states of the region will actively cooperate on the issues ensuring regional security;
- 3) The countries of Central Asia are interested in foreign investment and economic growth. China takes an advantage of these strategies, launching the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as Russia does, cooperating with the countries of the region within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union. Thus, due to the active development of economic ties with Moscow and Beijing, the countries of the region in question are moving towards minimizing ties with the United States of America.

Taking into account the interests described above, it is possible to simulate scenarios for the situation development in the event of tension escalation on the external borders of the region after the U.S. withdrawal

from the INF Treaty. These scenarios involve attempts by non-regional countries to use Central Asia as a foothold for the deployment of military forces and a response from other non-regional actors.

Expert survey results²²

At the end of 2019, the expert survey was conducted at the Kazakh-German University, which was attended by 15 leading Kazakh and foreign experts, specialists in the field of international relations and security. Among them are experts from research institutes in Kazakhstan, university professors, and specialists from international analytical centers.

The purpose of the survey was to identify the expert community positions on topical issues of regional security in Central Asia including an assessment of the state and peculiarities of the global military-political situation dynamics since the United States withdrew the INF Treaty on August 2nd, 2019, as well as to elicit new challenges and threats to the security of the Central Asia countries.

According to the experts, the following threats arose for the entire system of international security in connection with this event:

- 1) Increasing the arms race on a global scale;
- 2) Increased tension in relations between countries such as the United States and Russia, the countries of the European Union, etc.;
- 3) Further disintegration of the system of international treaties and the system of international law;
- 4) Threat of nuclear war;
- 5) Potential revitalization of NATO on the borders with Russia and Belarus;
- 6) Destruction of the global security architecture;
- 7) Impossibility of building trustworthy relations between the great powers.

According to some experts, "...the termination of this treaty will in no way affect the entire system of international relations, and new threats will not arise. On the contrary, the termination of this treaty will normalize the situation from the point of view of the international security system, since at present a serious pool of nuclear powers²³ has

²² The results are the Author's own source.

²³ Authors' note: the official list of nuclear powers for 2020 includes 9 states (Russian Federation, USA, UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea).

been formed, which have a desire to transform the modern world order and whose activities were not governed by this treaty.”

Besides, one of the expert opinions is that “in general, now the entire international security system is in the process of transformation and, based on this, it is an absolutely natural process, just as the security system changed after the Peace of Westphalia, etc.”

Based on these points of view, we can draw the following conclusion that the termination of this treaty states only the fact that a modern weapons system and a new system for ensuring international security require new approaches, documents, and agreements between countries. The termination of this treaty merely reflects the fact that the time has come to completely reform the entire system of international relations including the legal basis.

As for the regional security of Central Asia, Kazakhstani experts generally believe that the termination of this treaty cannot somehow affect the region, since it is part of a nuclear-weapon-free zone, and describe this situation as follows: “the countries of Central Asia are the small and weak states that are under the nuclear umbrella of the countries that guarantee our security (for example, Russia) and now no one here is interested in fighting. Rather, this region has a lot of internal socio-economic problems: the impoverishment of the population, the low efficiency of political regimes, and public administration. These problems are relevant in terms of ensuring security. There are no external threats as such”.

In terms of risks for the Central Asian region, which were indicated by foreign experts, the following can be distinguished:

- 1) “The risk of being involved in the conflict between the United States and Russia. This is especially noticeable for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which are allies and partners of Russia within the CSTO”;
- 2) Geographic proximity to Russia in the event of nuclear war;
- 3) Information war between the Russian Federation and the West;
- 4) The likelihood of China using the new Cold War for further expansion in the region;
- 5) Threats of China and problems of Russia as close neighbors and strategic partners (especially for Kazakhstan);
- 6) General aggravation of the international situation.

Describing the peculiarities of the socio-political situation dynamics in the world, most experts agree that: “The world is entering the stage of international competition between the great powers, free from a treaty base. The transitional period will continue, resulting in a necessity to

form a new balance of power. Probably, it will become the basis of a new long-term system of international security. In the course of its development, the proneness to the conflict will remain high. There is a hope that a major military conflict will not start, as it was in history when the global balance of power was changing.”

This global redistribution of power, property, and capital will take place between the United States, China, and Russia, and according to foreign experts, regional security will be determined by the level of interaction with these powers due to the geographical location, relations with China and Russia within the framework of organizations such as the SCO and the CSTO. The best solution for the region is to preserve the existing format of cooperation and initiate new forms of regional integration. According to various experts from Central Asia more attention should be paid now to the domestic policy and socio-economic development of the region.

Moreover, Kazakhstani experts proposed the following measures to ensure security at the regional level: “it is necessary to take joint vigorous measures to form a regional security system under the auspices of the Treaty on Joint Actions to Combat Terrorism, Political and Religious Extremism, Transnational Organized Crime and Other Threats to Stability and Security signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on April 21st, 2000”.

The prevailing opinion among foreign experts is: “that in the medium term, the international security system will change dramatically, and this will eventually be a new world order, the contours of which are taking shape now.” For example, within the frameworks of the Silk Road Economic Belt project, one of the three trans-Eurasian economic corridors (northern) runs through Central Asia²⁴.

Risks for the region

The conducted expert survey makes it possible to identify the main risks for Central Asia that may emerge after the INF Treaty termination. In our opinion, they can cause concerns not only in the countries of the region considered but also at the global level, since any destabilization in the region may negatively affect traffic flows that pass through the center

²⁴ N. D. Diamonds, *Proyekt Ekonomicheskogo poyasa Shelkovogo puti kak instrument razvitiya ekonomiki Kitaya*, <<https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/proekt-ekonomicheskogo-poyasa-shelkovogo-puti-kak-instrument-razvitiya-ekonomiki-kitaya/viewer>> (7.12.2020).

of the Eurasian continent. Besides, the geo-economic destabilization of the region will exert a negative impact on the common Eurasian security space due to the increasing challenges of terrorism, separatism, and uncontrolled migration. The two most likely risks that will directly threaten the region in the event of an aggravation of contradictions between the major nuclear powers are:

- 1) Risk No. 1. Attempts to put pressure on the countries of the region by the nuclear powers to deploy intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles on their territory. The desire of individual centers of world power to influence the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries is likely to lead to attempts to destabilize these states from within by introducing trade restrictions and using technologies for organized riots;
- 2) Risk No. 2. Reformatting the design of regional security in Central Asia. This can affect trade relations of the regional countries as a whole and sever economic ties between individual countries in particular.

The risks outlined above may result from attempts by well-known nuclear powers to use the territories of both the countries of the region and countries bordering on the region to strengthen their military presence to respond to emerging threats to their national interests.

Scenarios for the development of events

The risks identified in the course of the expert survey make it possible to consider the behavior of nuclear powers in the course of realizing their strategic interests as the most important prerequisite for destabilizing the situation in the region.

Scenario No. 1. The most probable scenario is that the Central Asian countries retain their nuclear-free status and do not allow the deployment of nuclear and non-nuclear missiles on their territory. As a presumption, we accept the assertion that the countries of the region, as well as the countries bordering on the region, are not interested in destabilizing the regional security system. The United States of America also shows an interest in maintaining regional stability. Consequently, all interested actors will make efforts to preserve regional stability. At the same time, we admit the possibility of increased competition for control over the region using various economic and political instruments. For example, China, Russia, and the United States can use soft power tools. These include the media, educational programs, and economic interaction. This

scenario is supported by the official statements of the leadership of the countries of the region about the need to strengthen cooperation, as well as to promote various integration initiatives such as One belt one road and the Eurasian Economic Union. It is also worth noting that Beijing and Moscow are attempting to combine these two projects by cooperating within the SCO. This option seems more likely to us, since transport routes pass through Central Asia, thus increasing the economic importance of the region.

Scenario No. 2. A conflict with the use or the threat to use intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles may flare up with the participation of regional players who will struggle for influence in the Central Asian region. As a presumption, we accept the statements that each of them is struggling for the realization of their national interests, as well as the statement that at the moment there are no contradictions between them because each of them (China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia) is in varying degrees of conflict with the United States. However, if the U.S. leaves the region, primarily its military bases, the balance of power in the region will change dramatically. Another very important circumstance is that each of the individual countries does not have sufficient resources to resist the nuclear powers. In this case, a struggle will begin for influence on the region on the part of countries that have nuclear potential on the one hand and economic potential to advance their geopolitical agenda on the other. These developments will lead to a revision of the regional security formats in effect. The very fact of strengthening the position of one side will lead to retaliatory actions from competing countries and other regional players. As a result, tensions between regional players will increase, which will require interference by the international community to normalize relations. In this case, the region will face destabilization resulting from an imbalance in the regional security system.

Scenario No. 3. The United States can strengthen its military presence under the pretext of combating international terrorism. The intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles without nuclear warheads can be used to strike at military bases in Afghanistan, and their counterparts with a nuclear charge can be used to deter other nuclear powers.

Consequently, strengthening terrorists' positions in Afghanistan can be an excellent pretext for placing this class of missiles dangerously close

to the borders of the Central Asian countries, which are the members of the regional security organizations such as the SCO and the CSTO²⁵.

It stands to reason that other countries possessing missiles with similar characteristics will have to react to this. As a result of the escalation, factors influence the further development of this situation, American military bases may become targets for attacks by any terrorist and bandit groups or Iran, as was the case in January 2020.

When drawing up this scenario, we proceeded from the presumption that the geographical proximity of the region to the borders of the key competitors of the United States, represented by China, Russia, and Iran, forces the administration of the United States of America to influence the military-political situation in the region. Furthermore, the deployment of bases with intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles in the region may become the most powerful instrument of such influence. We assume that not only Afghanistan but also any country of the region may deploy these military bases.

Conclusion

The study showed that the main threat to the nuclear-free status of the Central Asian countries is the disruption of the global balance of power, which can lead to changes in the architecture of regional security. This, in turn, can largely be the result of a change in the foreign and security policy vectors of the countries in the region. It is important to note that the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries does not always match the declared doctrines. Another factor is that the foreign policy vector is a reflection of the economic interests of political elites. If one of the global actors gains economic influence, it will be able to influence the foreign policy of its neighbors satisfying the economic needs of the ruling political circles.

Thus, we can claim that the INF Treaty termination poses a threat to Central Asia since it removes the corresponding obligations from the signatory countries, which in itself opens a 'window of opportunities' for the use of the Central Asian countries in the interest of stronger regional and global players. Consequently, all the actors in international relations, both regional and global, are interested in maintaining stability within the framework of the established formats for ensuring regional security. It is

²⁵ A. Khrolenko, *Taliby s boyami rvutsya k vlasti, Kabul okruzhenn?*, <<https://ru.sputniknews.kz/columnists/20200710/14447652/afganistan-taliby-kabul.html>> (6.12.2020).

necessary to strengthen international cooperation within the SCO, where the interests of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Iran (observer country) are represented. The SCO platform allows discussing issues related not only to ensuring security but also to promote economic cooperation.

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