

Letter From the Editors: March 13-19, 2017

With Missiles Like These, Who Needs Frenemies?

For those who believe time travel is possible, here's hoping that 1983 was a good year, because it certainly feels like we're returning to it: Not in terms of shoulder pads and upturned collars (although who wouldn't want to rock that look again?) but nuclear hysteria. According to military expert Pavel Felgengauer, NATO and Russia are essentially in the same mess as in the early 80's, when American Pershings and Soviet Pioner missiles made Europe a very uncomfortable place to be. Eventually, given the American missiles' superior accuracy, Moscow blinked first: "In the event of a preemptive (decapitating) strike, the top military-political leadership would have no time to safely evacuate from Moscow by helicopter, and it would be risky to take shelter from a surgically accurate nuclear warhead in a bunker. The chiefs did not intend to die, so the INF Treaty was signed, based on Reagan's 'zero option,'" Felgengauer concludes.

Today, the Russian General Staff is caterwauling that the 1987 INF Treaty was unfair, and both sides are accusing each other of violating it. The situation looks frighteningly familiar – the US is deploying bases in Romania and Poland, while Russia is threatening to station its Kalibr missiles in response (and perhaps has already deployed them in the Crimea).

Is it any wonder that in this scenario, more and more countries want a couple of nuclear warheads of their own, just to be safe? Spooked by the Trump administration's possible plans to leave Europe to its own devices when it comes to defense, EU officials are floating the idea of developing European nuclear deterrence, writes Andrei Akulov: "The nuclear deterrence plan proposes turning the French nuclear potential into a European nuclear deterrent." Ukraine decided to jump on the bandwagon – Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin said Ukraine wants its nuclear status reviewed. So if the EU decides to go nuclear, Kiev could be included in those plans. Given the EU's growing decentralization (according to Pyotr Korzun, the EU today is a set of "mini-coalitions based on shared geography or interests"), ensuring proper oversight could get complicated. Should we all learn to stop worrying and love the bomb?

Meanwhile, another nuclear wannabe state (at least until a couple of years ago) – Iran – finds itself branded as the regional scapegoat. Despite a nuclear deal brokered in 2015, the current US administration has accused Iran "of almost all Middle East problems," writes Ravil Mustafin. Part of the reason, according to Mustafin, is that the US still can't get over the humiliation it suffered during the 1979 hostage crisis and the debacle of a rescue operation that followed. In addition, Iran makes a convenient target for Trump – "On the one hand, it is important for the US president to show America that he is consistently fulfilling his campaign promises, and on the other hand, to take revenge on Obama, portraying him as a weak politician who can be easily duped." Why not kill two birds with one stone?

Washington's newfound enthusiasm for scapegoating Iran is shared by Israel and Saudi Arabia – two frenemies that suddenly find themselves surprisingly aligned. The dissenter on the issue is Russia, which happens to be one of the parties to the Iran-Russia-Turkey coalition that brokered the shaky truce in Syria. While Moscow's position is hardly surprising, the maverick in this game is actually Ankara: "A real god-send for Washington would be Ankara's withdrawal from the Turkish-Iranian-Russian alliance, if not the alliance's complete disintegration," concludes Mustafin. Considering that Turkish officials have been making conflicting statements of late, clearly trying to play both sides, Washington may get its wish.

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